

Elon 101

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PRIME MINISTER

National Forum
(E(79) 18)

BACKGROUND

You are familiar with the general background to this proposal. The Manifesto said:-

"There should also be more open and informed discussion of the Government's economic objectives (as happens for example in Germany and other countries) so that there is wider understanding of the consequences of unrealistic bargaining and industrial action".

2. The main purpose of a National Forum would presumably be to influence the expectations of the broader public and not just for the participants to influence each other.

3. The Chancellor's paper leaves a lot of loose ends for further consideration. He proposes an informal body, which you would chair, and that it should be based on the NEDC, with such additional membership (possibly fluctuating from meeting to meeting), as seemed sensible at the time. Tying it loosely to the NEDC might make it easier for the TUC to accept - since they already participate on NEDC. But it should also look sufficiently different to be seen as a new departure. The paper suggests a wider membership than the NEDC - but it would be very difficult to draw the line once other representative groups were granted a place. The German experience - quoted in the Manifesto - is not encouraging, since their equivalent body got too unwieldy and is now apparently in abeyance.

4. The paper suggests that arrangements for publicity should be for the forum to decide. In detail that may be right - but if the main aim is education, this aspect surely needs clarifying in broad terms before the proposal gets very far. There are obvious advantages for the process of educating the members of the forum if meetings are private and allow frank discussion. But for wider education - and to allow a debate in which the various economic

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commentators can feel they participate - some public exchange seems necessary. Perhaps one could have a private meeting, followed by an extended Press-briefing at which all Forum members could say their piece without any attempt at an agreed statement. That seems to have been the end result of the German model.

HANDLING

5. You might say that the main purpose of the proposal is to form one element in a process of public education. You might lead the discussion to clarify the following main points.

Is it worth attempting at all? —

If so:-

← How should its constitution and method of working be defined?

If it is based on NEDC, how will other members be selected?

Will they be asked as individuals or representatives?

Can they include academics or journalists?

Who will write papers or lead discussions?

↪ Presumably Government will start. But unless others pick it up fairly quickly will it not seem just a piece of Government propaganda?

How does one get its message to the wider public?

If public meetings are not adopted, will Press briefings be an adequate substitute? NEDC is not notably newsworthy.

How often should it meet?

Infrequent meetings would avoid displaying too clearly to public gaze the disagreements that will inevitably exist. But this would also reduce the chance of a consensus view emerging from debate in the Forum.

CONCLUSION

6. Subject to discussion you might conclude:-

- (i) that a forum would be only one element in a public education programme and that momentum should be maintained on other aspects e.g. Ministerial speeches, while the forum is being examined;

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- (ii) that a forum is worth trying;
and if so
- (iii) that the Chancellor of the Exchequer might take informal soundings of the TUC General Secretary and CBI Director General as to how it might best be organised to achieve its public educational purpose;
- (iv) subject to these consultations he should bring firmer proposals to colleagues, with the aim of having a first meeting as early as possible in the autumn.

Jgh.
(John Hunt)

16th July, 1979