

Authority of Government Policy Group

Minutes of the meeting held in Lord Carrington's room at the House of Lords on Tuesday, 11th November 1975.

Present: Mr. Ian Gilmour (in the Chair), Lord Jellicoe, Mr. John Peyton, Hon. George Younger, Mr. David Hardy, Hon. William Waldegrave, Mr. Jonathan Sumption, and Mr. Nigel Forman (Secretary)

Apologies: Lord Carrington

Mr. Prior on the Civil Contingencies Unit

Mr. Prior began by saying that the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) had been created following the mistakes made by the Government in the 1972 miners' strike. It had been set up under the auspices of the Cabinet Office and charged with the dual task of dealing with issues as they arose and planning ahead. There were three aspects to its work: helping to deal with major contingencies, such as a miners' strike; dealing with minor but important issues, such as the provision of stand-by generators for hospitals, Government departments etc.; and collecting and analysing information on potential or actual trouble makers.

On minor issues, it was very much concerned with matters of detail and the civil servants who served on it kept their Ministers informed. For example, it was able to do useful work on the effects of regional railway strikes on the conduct of Government in Whitehall by considering the availability of buses and hotel accommodation. On major issues, the CCU was never in a position to deal adequately with the problems of a major docks or miners' strike. In such circumstances it could only advise on technicalities and help to eke out the available supplies so that the Government had more time in which to negotiate. On the information side, it was able to draw upon information available from intelligence sources and to benefit from a Department of Employment assessment of the mood and objectives of the various trade unions.

On a routine basis the CCU met once a week, first under the chairmanship of Lord Jellicoe and later Mr. Prior. During a crisis it met every day, and received daily figures on coal and oil stocks which often proved to be inaccurate. In conclusion, the CCU was no panacea for the problems with which it had to deal, but it did help the Government in dealing with major strikes and in making useful preparations to deal with future difficulties.

/Mr. Gilmour

Mr. Gilmour asked Mr. Prior to clarify why the CCU had proved unable to do certain things in certain sectors.

Mr. Prior said that the main reason was that the use of troops in certain industrial situations was considered likely to precipitate wider industrial action. For example, in the July 1970 dock strike there had been strong pressure in the Ministry of Agriculture to bring in the troops to move perishable cargoes, but the food trade had successfully warned against such a move on the grounds that it would bring the cold storage and warehouse workers out on strike.

Mr. Waldegrave suggested that the CCU had nevertheless done some useful work which had led to improvements in Whitehall's capacity to deal with emergencies.

Mr. Prior agreed that it had brought about some improvements and added that a future Conservative Prime Minister should make sure that it was re-constituted as early as possible, if it was not still in being when we returned to power. He thought that we could have dealt with the small emergencies without the CCU, whereas in the big ones it had helped to buy some extra time.

Mr. Younger wondered whether the CCU ought to draw up plans to enable three docks to function during a national dock strike or to ensure the continued functioning of the sewage and water systems. Could this be done and was the CCU influential enough to push it through?

Mr. Prior said that the CCU had been powerful enough to deal with the problems of water and sewage, and to lay the groundwork for keeping three ports open - if that were the plan. However, it would not have sufficient clout in Whitehall and in the Government to deal with the wider consequences of such a plan e.g. squaring the transport workers. There had been considerable in-fighting between Whitehall Departments, although the quality of the civil servants on the Unit was generally high and they were generally well motivated. Once an emergency broke out, it would be better to raise the work of the CCU to wholly Ministerial level.

Mr. Sumption said that the key question was whether the Government of the day could keep three ports open indefinitely and was believed to be capable of doing so. If this was not possible, then it would not be a sensible strategy.

Mr. Prior agreed and added that in a dock strike the trick was to keep a large number of small ports open rather than a small number of large ones. The former

/strategy

strategy had been quite successful in the 1972 dock strike and one of the real dangers of the Dock Labour Scheme was that it would make such a strategy virtually impossible another time. It was also unrealistic to think that you could defeat a major strike without overwhelming public support, although even that was a necessary rather than a sufficient condition, since some groups of workers, e.g. miners, were much less susceptible to the force of public opinion than others, e.g. electricity power workers. Indeed, in the latter case they had gone too far too quickly with their industrial action in December 1970 and this had undermined their case in the eyes of the public.

Mr. Gilnour asked about the progress made in building up stocks of strategic supplies.

Mr. Prior said that the CCU had worked on an extensive plan for increasing stocks of sugar, wheat, flour etc., but that the matter was still under discussion when we left office.

Mr. Younger said that the Group had to try to think of ways of avoiding a February 1974 type of situation. The first point was that Government should not get involved in such a confrontation unless it could be sure of winning. But one factor which bore heavily on this was the need to find ways of dealing with the threat of wider industrial action, even of a General Strike.

Mr. Prior said that one important consideration on energy supplies was that Government might be able to resist more effectively in the future if and when the country became dependent on fewer people for them i.e. a few thousand people manning the North Sea oil installations and nuclear power stations rather than several hundred thousand miners now in the coal industry. As regards food supplies, in the long run something could be achieved by ensuring that adequate stocks were set up in smaller quantities dispersed around the country, even though this would be very expensive and difficult to organise. In the short run, it remained hard to see how a Government could win a major confrontation with - say - the dockers or the miners.

Mr. Peyton suggested that the only way of winning in those circumstances was to fight and win an election and, in the process, get the public properly concerned about its extensive vulnerability.

Mr. Younger said that the public would always back the Government against a strike affecting food supplies or sewage, but Mr. Gilnour and Mr. Hardy both pointed out that in such cases public pressure was more likely to be put on the Government to settle at any price.

/Mr. Peyton

Mr. Peyton wondered whether it would be possible to outlaw the right to strike in certain sensitive areas of employment, e.g. power stations, by drawing up special contracts and insisting on special conditions of service etc. Lord Jellicoe added that with fewer employees involved in the future, it should be possible to do more security screening of key personnel. Mr. Younger thought it was ridiculous that key power workers should be allowed to strike when they were every bit as essential to national security as members of the armed services who were not allowed to strike.

Mr. Sumption suggested that a non-legislative approach to this problem would be more fruitful, since in the final analysis workers could simply defy such legislation.

Mr. Prior said that the passage of time and specifically the effects of three more years of Labour Government might engender a more responsible attitude in the trade unions. However, there would have been another confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers this year if Messrs. Scargill and McGahey had been up against a Conservative Government. The fact was that the trade unions would not go out on any limb to help a Conservative Government, whereas they would help a Labour Government a little out of loyalty to the Labour administration, as the recent support for the Government's £6 limit had shown. What we had to do was to try to persuade the trade unions to work with any Government, because it was the Government - as had been the case for many years before 1970. He added that some senior trade unionists to whom he had spoken had told him that their relationship with the last Conservative Government had suffered its decisive damage very early on in 1970 when we had refused to allow the Conciliation Service of the Department of Employment to intervene in the dustmen's strike.

Mr. Younger asked whether this meant that we had to envisage the possibility of some future Conservative legislation effectively being vetoed by the trade unions.

Mr. Prior did not think the situation would be as bad as that. In fact, he strongly supported what Mrs. Thatcher had said at the Party Conference about the trade unions having to work with a Conservative Government if they wanted to preserve a liberal democracy and free society in this country. He was also attracted by the argument that we should agree to pay the unions' price, but tell them firmly that this meant less for everyone else and fewer jobs for those who made the demands.

Mr. Gilmour forecast that if we won the next election, the economic situation was likely to be bad when we came in - almost by definition. We would therefore have to introduce tough measures and do disagreeable things.

Mr. Peyton

One necessary step was therefore to increase our voting support among ordinary trade unionists.

Mr. Prior concluded the discussion by saying that we needed a period of time for past wounds to heal. He thought that the most productive line in our dealings with the unions would be to concentrate on trying to get greater democracy into trade union affairs and to make their leadership more genuinely representative of the rank and file.