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## CABINET

## DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

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PASSPORTS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth  
Affairs and the Home Secretary

1. The EC proposal for a common format for the passports of Member States was discussed by the Foreign Affairs Council in December 1980, when our position alone prevented a decision being taken, and it was agreed that a further attempt would be made to reach agreement at the Foreign Affairs Council on 16/17 March. We need to decide what our position should be. The question is linked with consideration of the possibility of adopting recommendations by the ICAO for a new format for our passports which would permit machine-readability and measures to improve our immigration control techniques.

International Passports

2. The UK has played a leading role in the formulation of internationally agreed recommendations by the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO) for the standardisation of passports. These recommendations call for all Member States of ICAO to present the personal data of the passport holder on a single laminated page in standard format, and to repeat this data at the bottom of the page in two lines of print which is capable of being read by machine. The laminated page could be either a free-standing card or part of a booklet. If machine-readability proves a practical proposition at ports of entry and if it is widely adopted, it would have considerable advantages for immigration authorities and for certain categories of traveller, some of whom could be processed more quickly. The standard page would in any event, even without machine-readability, enable

/passengers

passengers to be processed more quickly and would offer greater security against counterfeiting or alteration.

3. The United Kingdom played a full part in agreeing the ICAO recommendations and is happy with the result. The Home Office has begun a feasibility study of machine-reading terminals to deal with other countries' passports at British ports. Prototype machines may be installed at selected ports within the year. The benefit holders of our passports will gain from machine-readability, depends on similar progress in other countries. The ICAO format offers the best hope of sensible common standards.

#### The EC Proposals

4. In 1974, the EC Heads of Government decided in principle that the national passports of the Nine (now Ten) should have a common format to demonstrate the links between the States as Members of the Community. The passports in a common format would not be Community passports, and the decision now to be taken would not be one by the Community as such but by the Member States acting in concert. They would remain national passports and the issue of passports would continue to be a national prerogative.

5. Progress on agreeing the details of this scheme has been slow but the Italian and Luxembourg Presidencies have recently revived the discussions. In the discussions we have made it clear that we would only be ready to introduce common format passports if that coincided with achieving practical benefits for UK travellers. We have urged that full account be taken of the ICAO recommendations which are supported by all EC Member States and it has been accepted in Brussels that Member States can opt for a common format in either conventional form or in a form in accordance with ICAO recommendations. We have ensured in the discussions that a UK passport in the common format would retain the main characteristics of our present passports (the royal coat of arms on the front, the rubric "Her Britannic Majesty's Principal Secretary of State..... requests and requires .....etc). We have also obtained satisfaction on a number of lesser points and a few additional points are outstanding. The one major point still at issue is whether a date should now be fixed on which common format /passports

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passports would be introduced by all (the view of all Member States except us - 1985 is the favoured date) or whether no such date be fixed until we are clear when we are going to adopt the ICAO format (the UK position).

Conclusion

6. We propose that:

(a) I should take an early opportunity to announce our decision in principle to adopt as soon as practicable the ICAO recommendations for the incorporation into passports of a laminated plastic page with a machine-readable strip; I would however make it clear that further work was needed on the technical problems and costs involved before a date could be set for the change.

(b) In Brussels, we would stand firm by our position that we only introduce a common format passport simultaneously with our change-over to the ICAO format; that we were not yet in a position to set a date for adoption of the ICAO format, though we had announced our decision to do so as soon as practicable; and that we could therefore not yet agree to a time limit for introduction of the common format passport, while being ready to settle all other outstanding details.

(c) In presenting any decision in Brussels to Parliament and the media we would say that we had secured agreement that we should introduce the EC common format passport at the same time as the change to the new ICAO format, with all its practical advantages, which we had already announced.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
and Home Office

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9 March 1981