

AUTHORITY OF GOVERNMENT

Minutes of the meeting in  
Lord Carrington's room in the House of Lords,  
on Wednesday 25th February 1976.

Present: Mr. Gilmour (in the Chair)  
Mr. Hardy  
Mr. Sumption  
Mr. Douglas (Secretary)

Guest: Mr. Chappell

Apologies for Absence: Lord Carrington  
Lord Jellicoe  
Mr. Younger  
Mr. Peyton  
Mr. Waldegrave

Mr. Gilmour welcomed to the Committee Mr. Philip Chappell a Director of Morgan Grenfell.

Mr. Chappell began by saying that he was not, as he was described in the notice of the meeting, Chairman of the British Transport Docks Board but Chairman of the National Ports Council, a very different body which was non-operational and to a large extent advisory in character. He had not come prepared with a detailed statement but if that suited the committee he would sketch in broadly the background and then seek to deal with the topic by way of question and answer.

There were four types of ports in the United Kingdom. About a quarter of the ports were fully state-owned and operated by the British Transport Docks Board; these included Southampton, Hull, the South Wales ports and several smaller ones, together with others owned by BRB and BWB. Then there were the Trust Ports which included the Port of London Authority, Tyne and Tees, Clyde and quite a wide variety of other, generally smaller, ports. Thirdly, there were the municipal ports of which Bristol was probably the most important and finally there were the private ports of which Felixstowe has been much in the news recently, Manchester and technically the Mersey Company. One had to recognise that in practice there was a certain element of rivalry between the different types of port and that concentration of that corporate structure might diminish that rivalry and so any reality of competition.

There was also an important distinction so far as the labour force was concerned between registered dock labour and non-registered labour. About half the labour force say some 35,000 were registered dock labour. The largest Union organising this labour were the Transport and General Workers Union but there were also some other Unions involved (including, notably, the NUR and GMWU, both in scheme and non-scheme ports) and, as the committee would remember, there had been quite a history of intra-Union disputes in the industry. About 26% of the total tonnage was handled in non-scheme ports, so that non-registered labour accounted for quite a sizeable proportion.

The industry had undoubtedly had a bad history of strikes. Reasons lay in the history of the industry and a considerable share of responsibility for that record must lie with the employers. The virtually complete decasualisation of dock labour was very new in the historical context of the industry, a development of

.../the last ten years.

the last ten years. However, one should not imagine that the typical pattern of employment to-day was, as it had been in the more distant past, a matter of casual short term employment by a wide variety of employers. Some two-thirds of the labour force to-day were employed directly by port authorities.

Turning to the future, he thought Mr. Foot's recent concessions on the Dock Work Regulation Bill had avoided the danger of an immediate conflict between registered and non-registered men; but looking further ahead the possibility of this area remaining a source of conflict could not be ruled out. It seemed likely that the registered dock labour would eventually want to get their hands on the non-registered work in the warehouses, etc. outside the immediate confines of the dock facilities.

He thought the prospects of keeping the docks open in the event of a complete dock strike were gloomy. The Royal Corps of Engineers had a unit which might manage to keep essential supplies going for a short time but he was doubtful whether untrained men could handle modern dock facilities, particularly in container ports, even if you could get them through the dock gates. However, he had seen in recent years that the country could survive some time without using ports.

So far as terrorism was concerned it would be fair to say that ships were probably more difficult to blow up than an aeroplane but one had to admit that it was not very difficult to get people into the docks where they could blow up critical pieces of equipment that would bring the port to a standstill.

He was critical of the trend in recent and proposed legislation which was greatly increasing the tendency towards centralisation in the management and employment in the docks and thus increased the danger of one port out, all ports out.

He realised that he had painted a somewhat gloomy picture but there were two mitigating factors. The first was that, by comparison with employment in some other industries, like steel, one was not dealing with a very large labour force but only talking about some 64,000 people. Conversely unlike some other industries, like the power stations, the docks were not to the same extent vulnerable to a strike by a very small number of key personnel. The closest equivalent would probably be the lock-gate operators in enclosed dock facilities.

Mr. Sumption asked why soldiers would not be able to operate a modern container terminal.

Mr. Chappell replied that modern equipment in a container terminal was delicate and expensive and quite different to the sort of equipment soldiers and engineers would have been used to operating. In this respect the situation was quite unlike the situation in 1948 when troops had been able literally to shoulder cargo out of the ships.

Replying to a further question from Mr. Sumption, Mr. Hardy said that this type of equipment probably did not require enormous skill or very lengthy training to learn to operate. It was essentially a matter of being used to the machines. One probably could train people to operate the equipment in something like three weeks but then in the contingency of a complete dock strike as envisaged, one would not necessarily have three weeks in which to do it.

Mr. Chappell added that another factor was that the staff in the docks who would be members of the Engineering Union were likely to be quite as militant as the dockers and would quite likely not be willing to undertake the training of what they would see as strike-breaking forces. In this respect the docks were unlike

.../certain other industries

certain other industries where the staff identify much more with the management and could be expected to help train people to keep the operation going. He did not, however, think that the committee should put too much weight on the technical difficulty of operating the equipment. The first difficulty was getting the men through the dock gates which had always been the case but modern technical developments had added the second obstacle of operating relatively sophisticated equipment.

Replying to Mr. Gilmour, Mr. Chappell said that the difficulty of getting men through the dock gates was that for normal security reasons, there could never be more than a few gates into a dock. On the other hand one had also to remember that in the event of a complete nation-wide dock strike it would be difficult to organise pickets on all the gates of all docks in all ports.

Mr. Sumption quoting the example of a case in which he had been involved asked whether in effect it was true that in the event of a dock strike the Unions would prevent cargos being unloaded on the Continent and trans-shipped. From the case in which he had been involved, it appeared that the Unions in this country could in effect ask their fellow workers on the Continent to black any cargo which was destined for this country.

Mr. Chappell said that it was difficult to generalise. If a ship was specifically destined for a British port then probably the Unions would be able to prevent its being unloaded in a Continental port if the owners were to re-route it. On the other hand many ships would call at both a Continental and a British port and in this case it would probably be difficult for the Unions to make sure that nothing that was originally intended for this country was unloaded on the Continent and subsequently trans-shipped.

Mr. Hardy bearing in mind the experience of 1974, asked what were the prospects of a general backing for example of imports of coal.

Mr. Chappell said he thought it would greatly depend on the circumstances of the dispute. If the dispute arose, say, from some row in the Transport and General Workers Union, then it was quite possible that other Unions would be unwilling to support them by refusing to handle goods. On the other hand, if this was some major dispute in which the whole Trade Union movement had been antagonised, then general backing would be very probable.

Mr. Gilmour asked whether anything could be done to make ports less vulnerable.

Mr. Chappell doubted this. He would not like to see, for example, training courses instituted in anticipation of a dock strike to teach people how to handle the port facilities. He thought the types of cargo that were particularly vulnerable were bulk cargos such as grain and iron ore where unloading was a highly sophisticated computerised operation.

Mr. Gilmour asked whether Mr. Chappell had noted any change in militancy in the docks.

Mr. Chappell replied that the main change he thought was in Liverpool (and perhaps in London) where the dockers were now very conscious of their dependence on the success of their port. The present situation was bedevilled by dockers being faced with a conflict of loyalties: to their local port and to the National Dock Labour Board. Answering a question on the composition of

.../the labour force

the labour force and the rate of wastage, Mr. Chappell said that the average age of dock workers was now about 45 but there was sub-normal scatter about this average. The oldest men had left after 1972 as a result of the compensation arrangements agreed at the Aldington - Jones talks; no recruitment of young men was being accepted or needed and annual wastage was now very low.

Mr. Gilmour closed the meeting by warmly thanking Mr. Chappell for an extremely helpful and open discussion..

Next Meeting: The next meeting will be on Monday 8th March at 6.15 p.m. in Lord Carrington's room in the House of Lords. Lord Carrington will by then have returned from Australia and will be in the Chair. The speaker will be H.B. Greenborough Deputy Chairman and Managing Director of Shell (UK) Limited.

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