

RE-ASSERTING THE PREMIERSHIP - NOTE 2

This is a note up-dating my original memorandum, "Re-asserting the Premiership", in light of subsequent discussions. I also include a paper by a colleague, giving an historical perspective on the role and powers of the Prime Minister, which you may find has implications for the present.

Since I prepared the original paper, I have continued my research and discussions. At one lunch, attended by those with whom I had discussed the original paper during various stages of its development, the consensus was that the situation is broadly as described in the paper. Another "get to know" lunch with four new MP's considered "rightwing", had no advance subject-matter. I did not disclose either my preoccupations or the fact that I had been discussing the matter with the constitutional conventions group, yet they spontaneously retailed similar experiences and views. I also enjoyed a very long discussion with dear George Hutchinson shortly before he was finally hospitalised. He agreed strongly, and made valuable suggestions.

Consensus

\* It was agreed that the main leadership and inspiration of the anti-Thatcher faction came from Prior, not from Heath, the nature of whose association with the faction seems to remain a matter for speculation. Some would go as far to say that Heath remains aloof, others keep an open mind on the matter, while noting an increasing to-ing and fro-ing between him and protagonists.

\* It was generally agreed that Christopher Patten is the "chief whip" of the faction, added by Waldegrave, John Watson, John Patten, Dorrel, Needham. He is given moral and political support by Prior, Mark Carlisle, the Prima Ballerina and Gilmour (whom he helped compile his collections of quotations) among others.

\* It was agreed that Patten owed some of his initial success, with newcomers in particular, to his claiming to represent the party and government hierarchy. (I raised some of these matters in general terms off my own bat and in my own name with the Party Chairman, whom I see from time to time. He denied that any such problems or active disloyalty exist.)

\* It is also held by some that some of the Priorite antics by Patten & Co are beginning to antagonise middle-of-the-roaders by their unscrupulousness.

\* Some concern was expressed about influence over the selection of future candidates exercised by Anthony Royle, as chairman of candidates department, who is violently hostile to the Prime Minister, vulgarly so when in his cups, which is not infrequent.

Concern about the Lords was general. One member will report back on the Lords.

But beyond analysis and mapping the extent of distemper, there emerged no clear consensus on what should be done. It was generally agreed that something must be done; yet it was widely held that we did not want to create a rival faction. All that is needed for the triumph of evil ... - per Burke - yet one should not copy evil-doers.

We therefore agreed to hold another lunch after thought and consultation with the like-minded. My own view, for what it is worth, is based on my reading of British political and constitutional history. When an institution fails to carry out its proper function, it is frequently neither reformed nor abolished; instead another institution is established alongside it to perform the necessary function. Cabinet government must be made to work, against the inertia or worse of hostile colleagues and encrusted vested interests - e.g. civil servants, nationalised industry managements, quangoes and "fribs", marginal constituencies and other special pleading. To this end, the Prime Minister (and, in opposition, the Leader) must enjoy independent sources of strength, now that the old Authority attaching to the post has been eroded.

If the whips at best serve "the party", and at worst help pack vital committees with nominees of "the faction" (viz. the employment committee and the select committee on economic policy), they must be left to get on with that job, their fangs drawn, alongside , informal, Prime-Ministerial whip-equivalents of one sort or another. This will gradually win acceptance as a convention. If the Chairman sees his role as healer of rifts, and to that end hears no evil and sees no evil, the "Premier's man" in the party organisation must be found. In due course, the innovation will be accepted.

Some method is needed of awakening constituencies to the need to choose MP's who share Conservative and patriotic philosophy, and the need to bring home to parliament the feeling in the party grass-roots. This is a sensitive matter, I know, but so are most crucial matters. What Burke wrote to the electors of Bristol is one thing; the creature whom gullible constituency associations chose, often, as we know well, under prompting from various quarters, is another.

We must do much more about the women's organisation of the Party, beginning nationally. They are a great potential force for good, but are liable to be swayed the wrong way. Janet Young certainly does not have the time to deal with them. We need a super ordinary woman to inspire and mobilise them.

It also emerged from talks - with Hugh and George Hutchinson in particular - that there might be good grounds for strengthening the office of the Prime Minister in light of the heavier strain thrown on it by the expansion and diversification of government generally. The case for doing so would be strong even were there no problem of the Premier's authority, but a fortiori when that problem is with us. The cabinet secretariat exists to serve the cabinet, not the PM. In some cases might even be said to be working against the PM, though not necessarily intentionally. Previous PM's had stronger private offices, in the sense both of the calibre and of the office's personal and political loyalty to them, whether manned by career civil servants, specially chosen, or by outsiders. The Prime Minister is almost the only member of the cabinet to have neither a permanent secretary nor a junior or middle-ranking minister as a helper and load-sharer.

It may be worth considering the appointment of a Minister-Secretary to the PM's office, to look after both political and administrative matters.

The problem of civil servants in the private office is that concern for their careers cannot help influencing their relationships with senior civil servants in Cabinet office, civil service department and other departments. Might there not be room for institutionalising an earlier convention that private secretaries left the service when "their" prime minister resigned or on a change of government, as well as for strengthening the private office with non-career civil servants?

I shall write a further note following a forthcoming series of meetings with MP's and others, and the next meeting of the Argonauts to review the lessons of the steel dispute.

10 April 1980