

AUTHORITY OF GOVERNMENT POLICY GROUP

Minutes of the Meeting of the Policy Group on the Authority of Government held in Lord Carrington's Room on Wednesday, 10th September 1975.

Present: Lord Carrington (in the Chair)

- Lord Jellicoe
- Mr. Gilmour
- Mr. Younger
- ~~Sir~~ David Hardye
- Hon. William Waldegrave
- Mr. Sumption

Mr. Gleeson (in attendance)

1. The Scope of the Group's Study

Lord Carrington suggested that the Group should investigate three problems:

- 1) How do you restore the authority of Government when it has been lost?
- 2) How do you avoid losing authority in the first place?
- 3) What can you do to preserve your authority when you know you have to act in a manner which will be unpopular?

Mr. Gilmour felt that the first question was the important one. The others were too broad. They referred to the ordinary problems which politicians face every day and attempt to solve on a common-sense basis.

However, after discussion, it was agreed that the proposed division of the topics would provide a useful frame work.

Lord Jellicoe and Mr. Younger stressed that an issue of great importance was the relationship between Ministers, Civil Servants and the Boards of Nationalised industries. In the last Conservative administration this relationship had not always been satisfactory; although the Central Generating Board had performed admirably during the miners' strike just because there was determination, at the highest levels, to prove its competence to the Government.

Lord Jellicoe said that he would circulate a Paper on the contingency plans that had been constructed under his auspices in the last Government. Mr. Younger said he would circulate a Paper on Electricity Supply. Mr. Gleeson was asked to obtain from Mr. Prior information about the activities of the Civil Contingency Unit when he was in charge.

## 2. The Problem of Consent

Discussion focused on Mr. Forman's Paper. There was general agreement that Mr. Forman's proposition that the Party should not espouse proposals that did not have the consent of the groups most directly affected was not acceptable.

Members discussed the failure of the Industrial Relations Act. It was pointed out that in the early days all the opinion polls showed that our proposals had widespread public support. Nonetheless Trade Union opposition had rendered the Act inoperable. Lord Jellicoe and Mr. Gilmour argued that popular support for the Act had waned partly because it had proved in practice to be in some respects deficient, partly because the Government's overall economic policy was unpopular and made all its measures suspect. This loss of public support for the Act was considered crucial to its failure.

Lord Carrington said that an important general principle - nonetheless valuable for being obvious - was that it was easy to do unpopular things when the Government was popular.

Lord Carrington asked whether the Group wasn't concentrating too much on the authority of Government in relation to Trade Unions. There was evidence of a more general crisis of authority. The Clay Cross Councillors had defied the Law and there was a strong likelihood that ratepayers would do so in the near future.

Mr. Waldegrave suggested that a contributory factor to this general crisis of authority was the stridency with which Opposition Parties criticised Government legislation. This, together with the frequency with which laws were reversed, brought the Law into contempt.

Returning to industrial relations, Lord Jellicoe said that he completely agreed with Mr. Forman's contention that there was a lamentable lack of contact and understanding between ourselves and the trade unions. Mr. Younger said that since the unions were part of the Labour Movement it was inevitable that they should be hostile to the Conservative Party. Mr. Gilmour pointed out that before 1964 our relationship with the trade unions had been quite different. The latter had been conscious that about a third of their members voted Tory (indeed George Woodcock had almost certainly voted Tory himself on occasion) and this had influenced their attitude to Tory Government. It was still the formal doctrine of the TUC that they were prepared to cooperate with the Government of the day. Sir David Hardie said that he had heard trade union leaders maintain that their movement was treated with less attention and respect by the present Government than by its predecessor. Lord Jellicoe insisted that our policy in Government of intensive consultation with the TUC had represented the right approach, although it had come too late.

Other Members were pessimistic about the possibility of securing the active cooperation of the TUC although they agreed with Mr. Sumption that if a Conservative Government possessed a healthy majority trade unions would be more likely to accept it as an unavoidable fact of life.

Mr. Sumption observed that most people wanted something done about the unions but were not prepared to put up with the inconveniences that such action seemed to involve in practice.

Lord Carrington asked whether there were any lessons to be learnt from the Referendum. Mr. Younger felt that the vote on Europe had little significance ~~a General Election~~, because in the unique circumstances of the Referendum Labour supporters had been able to vote against the Left without being disloyal to the Labour movement and without bringing in a Tory Government.

Lord Jellicoe suggested that trade unions were more diverse than was often recognised. There was need for a systematic attempt to win their cooperation and also for measures such as postal ballots which would prevent the emergence of men like Mr. Arthur Scargill.

Mr. Younger suggested that one of the difficulties was that active popular support for particular measures was often only present for a very short period. Government should bring in any controversial measures swiftly while it possessed such support and avoid the usual procedural delays. Other Members felt that this approach would strengthen the opposition to such measures because they would appear unconstitutional.

Mr. Waldegrave pointed out that a major difficulty for Government was how to demonstrate convincingly it had overall support against a sectional group.

Lord Jellicoe wondered why there was now a greater problem about consent in Britain than in other countries, such as France, which had a strong revolutionary tradition. Mr. Sumption suggested that many continental countries had, of necessity, developed a counter tradition of strong Government. British institutions had developed against a more stable background. Other Members pointed to the fact that British trade unionists were more united and more deferential to their leadership than their continental counter-parts; and also to the absence abroad of Social Security Benefits for strikers' families. There was general agreement that, above all, we were paying the penalty for our economic failure since the end of the war.

Mr. Younger insisted that unless we could convince the public that we were able to handle the unions we would lose the next election. The task was to persuade first ourselves and then the public that faced with a confrontation, we could win. There could never be any absolute certainty about this but the Group should look in detail at all the weapons available for at least lengthening the time for which it was possible to resist a major strike.

All Members agreed about the electoral importance of appearing competent to handle the unions. But Mr. Waldegrave pointed out that it was by no means clear that it would be electorally advantageous to reveal that we had detailed contingency plans for major conflicts. He suggested that even public knowledge of the Group's existence might do the Party harm.

Lord Carrington was pessimistic about the Conservatives winning a confrontation, but expressed the hope that the problem would have to be faced and resolved by Mr. Wilson.

3. Future Meetings

// It was agreed that representatives of key industries should be invited to address the Group.

The next meeting of the Group would be on October 22nd 1975 at 6.15 p.m. Mr. Waldegrave offered to circulate a Paper based on the second question identified by Lord Carrington at the beginning of the meeting - How do you avoid losing authority in the first place ?

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