

AUTHORITY OF GOVERNMENT

Minutes of the meeting in
Lord Carrington's Room in the House of Lords
on Wednesday, 21st July 1976

Present: Lord Carrington (In the Chair)

Mr. Forman
Mr. Gilmour
Mr. Hardy
Lord Jellicoe
Mr. Sumption
Yr. Younger

Apologies for Absence: Mr. Peyton, Mr. Waldegrave

Guest: Lord Armstrong

Lord Carrington welcomed Lord Armstrong and explained that the Committee was an informal group which was looking at the problem of how a government could retain its authority when it came into conflict with some powerful organisation that was capable of bringing the country to a halt and preferably how a government would avoid getting into that situation. They had discussed this problem with a number of people with knowledge of the essential services and felt that there were certain lessons that could be learnt from past experience. The first rule was probably that the government should not take on somebody whom they can't beat, but there were a number of other points that had arisen from their discussion, for example the peculiar difficulties the government had in propagating its own case. Lord Armstrong had been very much at the centre of the affairs of 1974 and was in an ideal position to see where we went wrong and how we could do better should a similar situation ever occur again. To start the discussion off he asked Lord Armstrong whether he thought there were merits in a unit somewhere in the centre of the government machine to devise tactics and to cope with an emergency situation.

Lord Armstrong said that he thought that the idea of a unit was a good one. There had been a clear improvement in the management of the situation when the Ministry of Fuel and Power in 1974 had established a unit to deal with the emergency. The practical problem was to whom a unit of this sort would be answerable. The problem that had always worried him was that the chain of command on the Government side was very much longer than the chain of command on the union side. On the Government side the chain started with the Prime Minister went through the Secretary of State, through the Department and through to the nationalised industry. It was impossible to cut out any of the links in the chain but the decision-making process was greatly lengthened and by the time everybody on the government side had been aligned on to the same tack the union with its much shorter chain of command had changed tack. He thought an apparatus of civil servants somewhere in the Cabinet office for dealing with emergencies would be a valuable addition to the machinery of government. He thought it would have to be responsible to a group of ministers with one very senior minister at its head who would have to have the complete confidence of the Prime

...../Minister.

Minister. Such a unit would have to be able to take over responsibility both for the administrative tasks (e.g. working out the electricity cuts) and for the conduct of propaganda. In practice in 1974 the different functions had never been fully co-ordinated under a single command. The same body could be used for natural disasters which had many characteristics in common and where the same problem of the length of the chain of command applied.

Looking at the problem in rather wider terms and addressing himself to the question of how one got into the situation in the first place, he thought there had been a gradual erosion of the authority of government which was noticeable over the period in which he had been in public service. Thirty years ago there was general acceptance of the distinction between the Prime Minister and indeed other ministers acting in a national capacity and acting in a party capacity. He thought the rules on the impartiality of the broadcasting authorities had had a destructive effect. Nowadays almost whenever the Prime Minister made a broadcast the Opposition claimed and received a right of reply. Similarly, journalists and broadcasters felt that they needed to prove their virility by casting doubt on the official statistics whether these were of immigration or coal stocks and generally seeking to undermine the authority of government. On the other side of the equation, governments used to but seemed now more reluctant to accept that they should not enact laws which they could not enforce.

Mr. Younger however, pointed out that its enforcability was not an inherent characteristic of a piece of legislation which could be perceived beforehand but rather the result of the reaction of those affected by it, and it was a matter of judging how far people would go in resisting it.

Lord Armstrong thought that so far as the essential services were concerned no arrangements could stand up to opposition by really determined unions. Replying to Mr. Hardy, Lord Armstrong said he was not in a position to comment on the difference between the arrangements for the first and second miners strike as he had not been involved in the first. Replying to Mr. Hardy's second question about the commitment of the civil service he said that he had seen no evidence of bloody-mindedness on the part of civil servants although there was an element of disenchantment in some quarters, notably amongst those who thought that petrol should have been rationed.

Turning to the question of subversion, Lord Armstrong said that the use of intelligence report appeared to be more awkward under a Conservative than under a Labour administration such as Mr. Atlee's. This may have been because it was now more difficult to distinguish between subversion and extreme but acceptable political views at both ends of the political spectrum. It might be that the public were now more reluctant to accept that there were unpleasant things in their own woodshed and only too glad for the excuse to laugh it off as "Reds under the beds". Even so he thought the public would react against paid agitators.

Lord Jellicoe said that twenty years ago the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office used to provide regular information about subversives. Lord Armstrong said that the information was still collected, the difficulty was in using it. Lord Carrington suggested that some senior ministerial body should decide when and whether intelligence information should be used. Lord Armstrong thought there would have to be bipartisan agreement about this if the professionals were not to feel that they were being turned into a partisan political police.

...../Mr. Younger

Mr. Younger thought that this might also come within the orbit of the sort of unit they had been discussing. He thought the type of person to head such a unit was becoming clearer. He would have to be very senior minister indeed with the full authority of the Prime Minister behind him, capable of dealing with security, public progaganda and cutting across departmental boundaries and in practice he would also need a staff.

Turning to the question of propaganda Lord Carrington asked whether Lord Armstrong thought the Labour Party in office tended to run their publicity better than the Conservatives. Lord Armstrong replied that in the view of officials the best set up for co-ordinating Government publicity had been when Mr. Deedes had been in charge. Mr. Forman asked whether the implication was that there should be a Minister for Information. Lord Armstrong said that there was a long political history about ministers of information which revolved around the vexed question of how anyone could distinguish between party and Government publicity.

Lord Carrington asked whether in Lord Armstrong's opinion it would have made a difference if the Conservative Government had had a Bill Deedes in charge of co-ordinating publicity in 1974. Lord Armstrong's view was that it would so long as the minister in question had had the full confidence of the Prime Minister and his colleagues. Replying to Lord Jellicoe, Lord Armstrong thought that the Co-ordinator of Government Information Services should be someone who worked hand-in-glove with the Head of an emergencies unit rather than same individual.

Lord Jellicoe asked whether Lord Armstrong could think of anything else that would have made a difference in 1974. Lord Armstrong replied the only thing he could think of would be if instead of the Prime Minister himself having made the original approach to the trade unions before the Chequers and Downing Street talks this had been done by one of his lieutenants. If the Prime Minister could be detached from the earlier stages of negotiation he could then be brought in later as a sort of Court of Appeal to unblock a situation of deadlock.

Mr. Forman asked whether a referendum might not be used similarly as a sort of Court of Appeal. Lord Armstrong thought that the use of referenda was certainly something that was worth thinking about but not as a shot in the locker in the sort of situations that were under consideration. If in 1974 a Referendum had been held and had gone against the miners and the miners had decided to cock a snook at the result we would not have been any further forward. But referenda were one of a number of devices currently under discussion including Bills of Rights and electoral reform which might well have a part to play in the bigger task of restoring credibility and authority to government as a whole.

Lord Carrington thanked Lord Armstrong for an extremely interesting and valuable discussion. He thought the point about a Minister of Information to co-ordiante governement information services in particular was a valuable contribution of which the Committee must not lose sight.

...../Next Meeting

Next Meeting

It was agreed that the Committee would try and see Sir Conrad Heron at the next meeting and Lord Jellicoe undertook to contact him. The meeting would probably be after the Summer Recess and a note of the date of the meeting will be circulated in due course.