

M I N U T E S
OF THE FIFTH MEETING
OF THE FIRST ELEVEN
AT THE CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES
ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, 1981
AT 6.30 p.m.

Present: Professor Hugh Thomas, Chairman (first part),
Professor Sir Max Beloff, Chairman (second part),
Air Commodore Geoffrey Cooper,
Jan Hildreth,
John Hoskyns,
Professor R.V. Jones,
Terry Price,
Alfred Sherman,
Norman Strauss,
Christopher Monckton,
Nigel Morgan.

1 : NEW MEMBER : Prof. Thomas welcomed Air Commodore Geoffrey S. Cooper, Defence Correspondent of The Daily Telegraph, as a new member of the group.

2 : PRIME MINISTER'S FIRESIDE CHATS : Terry Price outlined his proposal, made at the previous meeting, that there should be a series of four or five messages from the Prime Minister for transmission on television outlining the background to the policies of the Government. Sample scripts were needed and two had been produced: one by himself and one by Max Beloff. The Opposition would be given the right of reply to these "fireside chats" and it was an advantage to provoke a reply when saying something new.

Norman Strauss said that neither the Prime Minister nor some of her Cabinet colleagues were yet persuaded that the idea was good. The reaction to the suggestion of a fireside chat on a specific but unnamed topic had been no, No, NO! Replying to Max Beloff, who asked whether the idea was worth pursuing, Norman Strauss said it was worth it, but the original, to-the-point messages had not yet been drafted and put before those who were to deliver them. These messages should contain two main themes: a statement that the Government shared with the nation an understanding of its problems and an expression of the reason why the Government has to do what it has to do. Many thousands of letters had been written to the Prime Minister asking for these chats.

Alfred Sherman said that if the Prime Minister were to speak for 20 minutes on all three channels the reply would be 20 minutes of ranting from Michael Foot. The negative effect of this would be of positive advantage to us.

Hugh Thomas clarified the point that we could assume that if we produced good ideas they might be accepted.

Terry Price outlined the possible subject-matter of the talks under five principal headings; the history of our present problems, the bases of Conservative policy, social and moral considerations, industrial and commercial topics and finally international and domestic politics.

R.V. Jones asked whether we could be too specific in telling the Prime Minister what to say.

Jan Hildreth wondered whether she could handle it. How long should the talks be? As a vehicle for ideas, would they be better than a lecture? What accepted ideas were we trying to change? What political notions accepted by socialists of both parties needed changing?

Hugh Thomas discussed the precedents for such talks, for instance Churchill and Roosevelt, who admired Winston for "rolling his own".

Christopher Monckton said that research showed the maximum attention-span for the average sermon to be a maximum of 12 minutes, or 1,800 words at news-reading speed. The language of the talks should be simple and direct in order not to waste the mass audience of the medium. This did not mean that the ideas conveyed had to be simple.

Terry Price felt that five talks of only 12 minutes each would be too short. Could we get anything across in that time which would really change people's attitudes? Or should we be directing our efforts at the opinion-formers?

Max Beloff said we should not be aiming primarily at the opinion-formers: we should be persuading trade union members that their leaders were leading them up the garden path.

Air-Cdre Cooper wondered whether Mrs. Thatcher would be more effective with an interlocutor than talking straight at the camera.

Norman Strauss said it was stupid to assume that anyone's mind could change overnight. However complex the message, we should get it out, so that some would understand it and it would percolate through to the rest. It should be made as complicated, intellectual and rigorous as possible. We might consider trying to express the evolving ethos of the times, which we would pick up and express, so that everyone recognised it and identified themselves with it once it had been vocalised. It would then have the impact of a road-to-Damascus conversion. First we should identify the objective. Then we should project the message.

Alfred Sherman said we should concentrate on those combinations of ideas which had to be removed in order to win acceptance of Conservative policy.

Jan Hildreth said that fireside chats were only part of the picture. We should first clarify the case we were trying to put across.

Alfred Sherman said that John Hoskyns and Prof. Alan Walters should tell us what the blocks to the implementation of these policies are.

Jan Hildreth pointed out that even such fundamental areas as the need for profit were not well appreciated by the voters.

Terry Price said that the limitation of the CPS was that it articulated events in whatever way the Government allowed it to: Mrs. Thatcher required to be convinced and not to be led.

Hugh Thomas Asked Terry Price to write an administrative paper outlining how the fireside chats might develop. Max Beloff strongly supported this and said he would prefer to go faster still: he was in favour both of the administrative paper and of a series of draft chats.

Norman Strauss said the assumption was being made that clarity of vision would arise from people writing, when it might not do so. One of the most important purposes of these meetings was to put the participants into an interactive mode from which a flow of ideas would emerge.

Max Beloff countered this by saying that it was from disputation that talk progressed and that it would be helpful to have a paper against which to argue.

Norman Strauss stressed the need for strategic thinking: we needed to develop a valid persuasion strategy.

Air Cdre Cooper said it might be worthwhile to have Mrs. Thatcher talking to one of the aircrew on standby with a nuclear missile interceptor squadron. She would answer his question: "What is it that we are defending, and is it worth it?"

Norman Strauss said this was a lovely executional idea.

Hugh Thomas said we should each produce a draft of 1,200 words, but RV Jones was reluctant on the grounds that the essence of a fireside chat should be that the giver actually wanted to give it.

Alfred Sherman said that when Mrs. Thatcher was unscripted she was good. The best approach would be a prepared but unscripted series of interviews and discussions.

Max Beloff said that interviews were commonplace, while chats were unusual enough to have novelty value.

Norman Strauss suggested the idea of the unattributable TV interview, an idea which found instant favour. He went on to ask these questions: How does the Government know what it wants to do? How does it choose the way to do it? How does it know it is the right thing to be doing? Before the election Mrs. Thatcher had won the people's confidence by talking new things.

RV Jones said phase one was that the man in the street should realise that there is a body at the centre which appreciates the problems and is seen to appreciate them.

Jan Hildreth again asked what was the destination to which we were working. It was a management consultant's cliché, but it was the right question to ask.

Max Beloff said that so far the Government had been concentrating on only one aspect of its intentions. That was the cutting of public expenditure. But other things, such as union power and the reform of the civil service, were all part of what a government should be aiming at. But these subjects had been pushed into the background by the recession and by the Government's first moves towards changing the balance between public and private expenditure.

Hugh Thomas asked for the following tasks to be completed before the next meeting:

Terry Price was to prepare a short note in the form of a paper which would take into account that the fireside chat idea was simply one aspect of the problem, which was to get the message over.

Air Cdre Cooper was to write a 1,200-word chat on patriotism. Jan Hildreth ditto on profit. Hugh Thomas on the history of Government interventionism since 1906. Max Beloff on political considerations. Christopher Monckton to redraft the drafts already submitted by Terry Price and Max Beloff.

3 : PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE : Terry Price reintroduced his proposal for an Office of the Prime Minister by saying that the present Government could have made a better job of making, testing and projecting strategy than it had done: it was not a strategically-minded Government. The question was whether the Government, by creating a machinery of the proposed kind, would put itself into a position of disciplining itself and being better boys and girls in future. There was something about the Civil Service machine which led to the Lowest Common Denominator solution every time.

John Hoskyns said he did not think we were an unstrategically-minded Government: but he suspected that the government was more strategically-minded than many. However, it had not got much further than they had. There was an awareness of strategic thinking, but what did one do to get the fruits of strategic thinking in action? The Prime Minister's first reactions to Terry Price's paper on the idea had been neutral: she took on board the point that the lead-time for discussion of Cabinet papers was too short for mature consideration, but the question of other ways of organisational change would take more time to discuss. There was a tendency among other elder statesmen in the Party to put the view that if a precondition for getting anything done was to get the Civil Service under control, the next Election would have come and gone before we got started. We should therefore concentrate in the first instance on short-term changes: how can you do a small number of things in terms of the way people at present operate? How could we bring more outsiders into the Civil Service after the next Election? Or could we start something more fundamental in the way of Civil Service reform? There was a difficulty of long-term thinking.

4 : WAYS OF PERMANENTLY REDUCING THE SIZE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE :

Terry Price said that what we needed was an Office of Debyzantinisation, a kind of souped-up Public Accounts Committee, because it was unrealistic to expect an organisation to destroy itself. In response to a question from Christopher Monckton, he said that he was not advocating the establishment of an enormous, new bureaucracy: his proposed Public Service Commission would not have more than 100 members.

Christopher Monckton said that the idea of trying to cut the Civil Service by the imposition of cash limits - 10pc here or 15pc there - was politically dangerous and unworkable in practice. The only way to make effective cuts was to close down whole departments one at a time when their functions had become either outmoded or ineffective.

Alfred Sherman proposed Energy, Employment, Industry and most of Education as immediate candidates for the axe.

Max Beloff said we could not yet identify the surplus bits. It was not always appreciated that the Civil Service had a tremendous defensive capacity as against Parliament. It was to be regretted that the Cabinet had supported the Mandarins on the notion of "constitutional responsibility". He thought it was mad of the present Government to do what its predecessors had done and back the Civil Service.

Norman Strauss explained that this was because Ministers had no real goals other than to become a Minister. How did they know they were Ministers once they had become Ministers? Because there were civil servants working for them.

Jan Hildreth said we needed a constitutional device for opposing the Civil Service.

Terry Price reiterated his proposal for a Public Service Commission with a membership of 100.

Norman Strauss asked who would select the Commission.

Alfred Sherman suggested that any member of any Government since 1956 should be disqualified.

Jan Hildreth said that aims, and the power to pursue those aims, should be the starting-point. We must cut out whole functions and not ten per cent. here and there.

Terry Price said that the membership of the Commission need not be confined to MPs: for instance, members of the House of Lords might be appointed.

John Hoskyns said it would be necessary to operate in three stages: to find the right people, to open the door so that they could examine everything and then to enforce their recommendations.

Norman Strauss raised the question how to get the expertise to design the Commission, how to work out its powers and how to staff it. He would start with the assumption that this Parliament could not be effective and that we had to do an undemocratic thing and provide them with experts whose advice would have to be taken on a 20 per cent. approval. Through time the control would swing back to Parliament.

Terry Price suggested a role analogous to that of the Air Force Inspector-General, an air officer whose job had been to investigate the efficiency of various units. He had himself been Mrs. Barbara Castle's scientific adviser for seven days. Upon question he explained that it had been Mrs. Castle and not he who had moved.

Terry Price discussed the possible timing of a move against the Civil Service. He said that at present the Government dared not interfere and that in the run-up to the next Election it would not dare to interfere. The right time would therefore be immediately after getting into office a second time, provided that a detailed strategy had been worked out, tested and agreed in advance.

Max Beloff said that although he had originally opposed the United States system of changing the heads of the Civil Service with the Government, he was coming round to the view that it was best because the advantage was that the Government then had the power to act. We now had the ridiculous situation where we had to have the Civil Service but could not see the papers of the previous administration: it would be better if we could see the papers but not have the chaps.

Terry Price said that nothing would happen unless a paper were produced which was then thrust in front of Ministers. If they bought it, then something had to change.

Norman Strauss asked what was the attitude change model we were working on. Papers of this sort had been given to Ministers as long ago as 1977 and nothing had happened.

Air Cdre Cooper said we would all agree that there were too many civil servants: but how should they be cut?

Norman Strauss said that civil servants had neither a conscience nor a sense of patriotism. The system was defunct.

Terry Price said our Ministers had taken insufficient care to take control of the battlefield.

John Hoskyns said we had a structure of government that precipitated into office people who were not going to take decisive action. We were discussing structures. No single structure or set of structures could work.

Max Beloff said that if we were talking about closing down whole Departments an analysis of the essential and non-essential functions would have to be made. For instance, in the Department of Employment the labour exchanges were necessary, though they could perhaps be handled by the private sector. The cuts would have to be made by policy and the machinery existed in the Parliamentary Select Committees, but the difficulty was that they had accepted limitations on their access to information. They were also not staffed with men of sufficient calibre.

Norman Strauss said that the people who had the ultimate power of decision were the Parliamentarians. If they had the staff to do a fundamental appraisal and the staff had the time to do it, would the presentation of the findings be capable of being understood by the members of the committee? If they could understand them, would they devote the time to understanding them? No.

RV-Jones said that we needed a civil service, but was it as efficient as it could be? It was now in every civil servant's interest to multiply the number of people under him. So, in the welfare system in the past 30 years, there had been a multiplication of ministries. A lot of the health and safety regulations were ridiculous. The safety inspectorates in the mines and on the railways were doing a good job, but elsewhere there were not too many regulations.

John Hoskyns wondered whether the system was capable of regeneration.

Max Beloff said he was convinced in theory that little could be done, but he was consoled by history. In 1780, when the movement for economic reform began, for eliminating the forms of corruption in the Government machine, it had looked difficult. But within 50 or 60 years a major change had been brought about. The difficulty seemed to be that we were therefore talking of a period of 50 years before anything got done. However, what had made it possible for major reforms to happen had been a consensus to which successive Governments had contributed.

Air Cdre Cooper suggested that we should tell the civil service that it had to cut itself by ten per cent. and let it decide how to make the cuts. Fleet Street could monitor the results.

Norman Strauss said that if a Government gave the civil service a clear instruction it would not carry it out because it had not carried out a clear instruction for many years. They did not know what a fundamental examination of their purpose was. They had no fundamental comprehension of the purpose of a department or of how to cost it.

Jan Hildreth asked why Ministers had not the will to do what needed to be done. We had to attract better ministers to the job.

Norman Strauss said that if Mrs. Thatcher were to stand up and say, "There is a long and complicated analysis that we have gone through which shows that the current system that we have cannot work; I will not attempt to go through the theory but here are the solutions, these are our conclusions: we are now committed to changing the nature of Parliament, the nature of MPs, the way they are trained, the nature of the civil service; and what we are saying to you is that no Government can achieve its aims because it itself is not good enough and particularly because the machinery of government is not good enough; we are coming to you at the next Election with a manifesto for fundamental reform," that tied the whole evening's discussions together.

Max Beloff said that in the period of history about which he had been talking the Government had consisted of peers of the realm and landowners to whom it did not matter whether they were Ministers or not Ministers. We had to reckon with a professionalised political system which made any major change more difficult. The suggestion that the political levy to trade unions should be stopped might be thought original. But it had been advocated in 1927/8 by Winston Churchill, who said that all political parties should be paid for by the taxpayer. Our decline could be dated either from 1911, when we began paying our Members of the House of Commons, or from 1919, when the minute was produced which made the head of the Treasury the head of the Civil Service.

Terry Price said that for next time were we not actually saying, "How do we organise a revolution?"

John Hoskyns said that this was surely the central agenda for our group.

The meeting closed at 10.01 p.m.

NOTES

A : These minutes are fuller than usual. Do members of the group prefer them at this length, or would they rather have the usual condensation of the main points which emerge?

B : Tasks for next meeting are as follows:

- * Terry Price to write a short note in the form of a paper which would take into account that the fireside chat idea is simply one aspect of the problem of getting the message across. The paper to be an administrative paper outlining aims and methods.
- * Air Cdre Cooper to write a 1,200-word chat on patriotism.
- * Jan Hildreth ditto on profit.
- * Hugh Thomas on the history of Government interventionism since 1906.
- * Max Beloff on political considerations.
- * Christopher Monckton to try to redraft the chats already submitted by Terry Price and Max Beloff; the length of each to be 1,200 words, the style to be direct.