

AUTHORITY OF GOVERNMENT

Minutes of the meeting held in Lord Carrington's Room at the House of Lords on Thursday 27 November 1975

Present: Lord Carrington (in the Chair)
Mr. Younger, Mr. Hardy, Mr. Waldegrave,
Mr. Sumption, and Mr. Forman (Secretary).

Apologies: Lord Jellicoe, Mr. Gilmour and Mr. Peyton.

Lord Carrington welcomed to the meeting Mr. Lewis Allan, former Chairman of the South Scotland Electricity Board.

1. Mr. Allan on the Electricity Supply Industry

Mr. Allan began by saying that he thought top management would be completely loyal in the event of a strike in the electricity supply industry. There would therefore be a nucleus of people who could direct others brought in from outside. Some of the technical staff might be loyal too and those that stayed at their posts would be invaluable in an emergency. The manual workers in the industry were divided between four different unions. Some of the managers had even been trained on the quiet in such practical skills as driving bull-dozers. As regards the best kind of people to draft into power stations in an emergency, he thought that the armed services would be more suitable in every way than people who had retired from the industry. This was because the conditions were likely to be rough and tough, and the work involved would require all the advantages of youth, strength and obedience normally associated with the armed services.

The other important factor in an emergency would be the availability of fuel for the power stations. Nuclear power stations had some advantages in this respect in that, provided the load was reduced, they could go on running for at least a week without much attention and without changing the fuel. The only penalty paid for this was that it could mean reduced output later on because of damage to the plant from running unattended with the fuel unchanged. Oil-burning power stations were easier to keep running in an emergency than coal-burning ones, because there were fewer physical problems involved in moving the fuel (e.g. 20%-30% of coal burned in power stations was useless ash and moisture). The important thing was to try to keep the big power stations going where it was normal for management to try to keep about 6 weeks' stocks of coal on the premises. Since in normal conditions it was not so necessary in oil burning power stations to keep large stocks, they would be more vulnerable to fuel shortages in an emergency. Nuclear-powered stations were probably the least vulnerable on this score. Some oil-burning power stations (e.g. at Fawley) used oil piped directly from nearby refineries, but this was not the normal situation. One of the problems was that power station sites tended not to have been laid out with enough room on-site for the sort of storage needed in an emergency. After the 1972 miners' strike measures were taken by the Electricity Boards at Government expense to improve on site storage facilities for auxiliary fuel and materials. But not enough had been done about the main fuels burned.

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On the technical side, coal handling was the big problem in any emergency where the workers had withdrawn their labour. One obvious solution was to introduce a degree of dual firing by modifying the burners so that a coal burning station could use oil or natural gas in an emergency. It was even possible to get 25%-30% load out of burning oil in a coal burning station without the necessary modifications. Once again this suggested the need for more on-site storage of oil for such eventualities. Dual-firing was not economically worthwhile, but it did pay off in an emergency. Whatever one did about emergency arrangements for personnel and fuel, it was essential for the Government to allow the industry to reduce the power load and output to consumers.

In answer to questions from members of the Group, Mr. Allan made the following additional points:

- Middle management in the power stations might even enjoy it if the army was brought in to help run the installations. For example, the army had been very welcome when it had moved in to clear up the rubbish during the Glasgow dustmen's strike.

- Changing the burners in power stations to permit more dual firing could probably be done in a discreet way without appearing to be provocative.

- The use of troops in power stations should be concentrated in those areas where troops could make their most effective contribution and those tasks which could be learned quickly, leaving the more technical tasks to the management.

- The vital thing in an emergency was not to let the grid fall apart. Circumstances would vary from power station to power station according to the availability of fuel and personnel. The Electricity Boards could always juggle with their available power and provided they avoided over-heavy transfers in any one part of the grid, they could keep the system as a whole working on reduced load for some considerable time. It might be necessary to keep some small stations on stream as well in order to facilitate the juggling process. If a station became overloaded, it would have to shut down. If it was underloaded, it would probably only supply a limited area. Provided the Government permitted the industry to reduce its load, the industry itself could cope with all the technicalities of switching, etc.

- When considering preparations for what he called siege measures, it really all boiled down to fuel and personnel. Modifications to burners, storage of lighting oil and auxiliary materials, and security measures had all been or could all be dealt with. Two obvious steps would be to put in bigger oil burners and to increase oil storage at power stations. It might also be worth making arrangements for stand-by supplies of North Sea gas at certain power stations, since gas was an easy fuel to handle, it could be burned in coal burning boilers with only minor modifications, and it could achieve about 50% of the normal load. The drawbacks would be that it would be seen as an emergency preparation when it was done, it would probably produce difficulties with the Gas Council, and it would necessitate a deliberate reduction in normal gas consumption by industrial and domestic users.

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- People working in power stations before the passing of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act had been subject to the 1871 Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act which was posted on notice boards for the workers to see. But such conditions of employment could probably not be brought back now. However, the industry could probably train some of its managers on the quiet to do some emergency tasks.

- There was not much that industry as a whole could gain by putting in its own generating equipment, except on a stand-by basis for emergencies. However, for certain process industries, such as paper-making, it might be more worthwhile.

Lord Carrington concluded the meeting by warmly thanking Mr. Allan for his contribution.

2. Next meeting

It was agreed that Mr. Waldegrave would contact someone from the Bristol Water Authority and invite him to speak to the group on the problems of water and sewage in an emergency. The date set for the next meeting was 6.15 pm. on Tuesday 9th December in Lord Carrington's Room at the House of Lords.