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From the Secretary of the Cabinet: Sir Robert Armstrong KCB, CVO

21st July, 1980

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Times Articles of 17th and 18th July by Peter Hennessy

Peter Hennessy's two recent articles - the first in the Times on Thursday, 17th July, with a follow-up piece in Friday's edition which refers specifically to a DOE 'Management - in Confidence' document - represent a serious and embarrassing leak. I believe that it would be right to try and determine the source of his information.

Following the first article with its reference to the Cabinet Office, DOE and local authority representatives, it seemed to me that what was required was a quick inquiry, which I would launch, based on the personal questioning of individuals in these areas. I saw little point in embarking on a wide-ranging inquiry involving all the departments and all the people who were aware that Ministers had instructed civil servants to assess the feasibility of using volunteers in certain industrial situations. I remain of that view, and believe that oral interviews by a suitable investigator would be the best way to proceed. In the light of the investigator's report a decision could be made about whether there was a need for a further process of inquiry.

In view of this latest article, however, with its specific reference to a DOE document, it seems to me that the most fruitful course for any inquiry would be for it to centre on the DOE and its consultations with local authorities, and that perhaps John Garlick and his Department should be responsible for the inquiry. If we agreed to proceed in this way, the Cabinet Office would, of course, co-operate in any way the investigator saw fit.

I am copying this letter to John Garlick, Howard Smith, Bill Beckett and Tony Hetherington. I am also sending a copy to Clive Whitmore.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Sir Ian Bancroft, GCB

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Extract from The Times dated 18 July 1980.

Civil servants ordered to study possibilities of volunteer strike-breakers

By Peter Hennessy

Ministers have instructed civil servants in the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) of the Cabinet Office to assess the feasibility of using civilian volunteers to replace striking workers in essential industries and services during a future "winter of discontent".

The Government is keen on the voluntary principle and would like it applied to the sensitive area of industrial disputes. The idea has been greeted with much scepticism in the emergency planning community in Whitehall and by the few local authority representatives who have been consulted.

The final judgment of the contingency planners has yet to be placed before ministers, who sit with officials on the CCU under the chairmanship of Mr William Whitelaw, Home Secretary. It will probably be incorporated in the CCU Review, a document prepared annually in August and September for the Prime Minister by Mr Robert Wade-Gery, the Cabinet Office deputy secretary who leads the CCU when it meets as a Civil Service body without ministers present.

The planners judge the use of civilian volunteers in industrial disputes to be a far greater provocation to the labour movement, and a more potent trigger of sympathetic action by workers in other areas, than the application of military labour under the Emergency Powers Acts 1920 and 1964 which has been commonplace in the recent past. Civilians have not been introduced since the general strike of 1926 though the Attlee administration of 1945-51 considered the possibility.

The CCU, one of the most sensitive and secretive of all Cabinet committees, has not met for several months. Ministers raised the possibility of using volunteer labour in its short burst of activity earlier this year when the country's first national water strike seemed possible.

Apart from the danger of civilian volunteers exacerbating disputes, the contingency

planners are well aware that the number of areas in which they can be of any real use are severely limited. Energy supply is the CCU's single most acute worry and the Armed Forces, let alone untrained civilians, are no longer capable of running power stations.

The G2 division of the Department of the Environment, under Mr Frank Elders, who represents the ministry on the CCU, has been among the more active parts of Whitehall in pursuing the possibility of volunteers. Private meetings have been held with representatives of the local authority associations, though nothing has been agreed as yet.

The idea has generally been received without enthusiasm in local authority circles. They have had recent experience of the use of troops in the firemen's strike of 1977-78; but the introduction of civilian volunteers is regarded as both qualitatively and constitutionally different.

With the exception of 1926, fear of precipitating what could amount to a civil war between the Government, its volunteers and the labour movement has always brought governments back from the brink of using civilians to break strikes. The last time it was seriously considered was by Mr Attlee's emergency organisation in 1947.

In the aftermath of an unofficial road haulage strike, the Labour Supply subcommittee of the Government's Supply and Transport Organization began to prepare, in great secrecy, a scheme for recruiting volunteer non-military labour "to meet the vital needs of one or more industries" in a future emergency.

Among the papers in the Public Record Office is a vividly worded "specimen poster or press notice" to be used in the recruiting drive. It reads:

"National emergency. Volunteers wanted for essential services only to maintain the life of the nation".

Mr Attlee never implemented the plan. But the Armed Forces were used several times between 1947 and 1951 to break strikes in the docks and the electricity supply industry.

Extract from The Times dated 17 July 1980

HOME NEWS

Civil Service drive to recruit accountants is falling below target

By Peter Hennessy

Whitehall's efforts to recruit more accountants to sustain the drive for greater efficiency and economy in the Civil Service is falling well below target, according to figures published today by the Civil Service Commission in its annual report for 1979.

Last month Sir Ian Bancroft, Head of the Home Civil Service, said in a speech to the annual conference of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy that "the Civil Service has too few accountants . . . we are attempting to put this right". At present there are 1,000 accountants in the Civil Service strength of 705,000.

Last year the Civil Service Commission attempted to fill 51 vacancies for accountancy posts. From 211 applicants, 24 were appointed to accountant and senior accountant positions.

Uncertainty arising from the recruitment freeze imposed by the incoming Conservative Government in 1979 added to Whitehall's customary difficulty in finding the professional, technical and specialist staff it needs. Mechanical and electrical engineers, and surveyors of all kinds, like accountants, were especially difficult to find.

Departments also found it hard to recruit men and women of sufficient calibre to staff their press offices. Of 195 vacancies in the information officer group last year, 120 were filled.

Applicants, at 3,419, were higher than in 1978, but "their

quality continued to be disappointing, with some posts, such as those for journalists, particularly difficult to fill", the Civil Service Commissioners noted.

Oxbridge bias: Three out of five of last year's successful external candidates for the highly regarded administration traineeships in the Civil Service had Oxbridge degrees, according to statistics given in the commission's report, (our Education Correspondent writes). Oxbridge accounts for only 5 per cent of all undergraduates in the United Kingdom.

Nearly half the successful candidates had been to maintained schools, a quarter came from direct grant schools, and a quarter from independent schools.

The highest success rate (29 per cent) was among those who had been to a direct grant school and then to Oxbridge, followed by a combination of maintained school and Oxbridge (20 per cent), and then independent school and Oxbridge (17 per cent). The overall success rate for the 2,356 candidates who entered the competition was 8 per cent.

Overall, 20 per cent of those with Oxbridge degrees were successful, compared with only 5 per cent of those with degrees from other universities and polytechnics.

Very few (7 per cent) of the successful candidates had degrees in science and technology.