

PRIME MINISTER

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Firemen: Mr. Whitelaw's Statement

As you know, the Home Secretary had to answer a PNQ from Merlyn Rees this afternoon. The text of his Answer is attached.

Mr. Rees asked him how many men were involved and what he meant in his Answer by "significant additional risk to the public". He asked whether it was true that the local authorities agreed last week to an increase of 18.8 per cent and whether Mr. Whitelaw had asked them not to honour the agreement. He asked whether the Government had interfered. He said that in November 1977 he had told the House that the Government would give the firemen an assured basis for their pay in the longer term and he referred to the quotation attributed to you, and reproduced in several newspapers over the weekend. The precise words, reported as having been said by you on 21 November 1977 are:

"We must recognise that the firemen are in a different position from other people. We rely on them and I am prepared to pay them a bit more."

In answer to this, Mr. Whitelaw said that most Brigades in the country were now involved; his Statement meant what it said on "significant risk"; he had not intervened; the Government had not intervened; and that it was widely recognised that it was now essential to have a firm restraint on incomes in the public sector.

Teddy Taylor said that public sympathy for the firemen would be lost if life was put in danger because firemen arrived late at fires. Mr. Whitelaw said that that was a matter for the Fire Brigades Union, and that the Government was keeping the situation under review.

Russell Johnston said that we ought to go back to having a prices and incomes board if we were going to have a public sector

/ pay policy.

pay policy. Mr. Whitelaw repeated what he had said earlier about the need for a firm grip on public sector wages.

Donald Stewart said that the firemen had believed the promises they had been given and now felt betrayed. Mr. Whitelaw said that the agreement was between the FBU and the local authority employers. He emphasised that talks were still going on and said that it would be improper for him to comment further on them, since he had no place in the negotiations.

Mark Hughes said that the Home Secretary was leaning on the local authorities to tear up their agreement. He was doing great damage to industrial relations, and the blame for any loss of life would rest on his shoulders. Mr. Whitelaw said that the Government has always had to take responsibility for its actions, but that the matter was still a subject for negotiation. He said that the Government had set out cash limits for local authority employers and it was up to them to decide how to operate with them.

Merlyn Rees asked whether the Home Secretary would prevent any agreement reached between the two sides being implemented, if it offered the prospect of peace in the future. Mr. Whitelaw said that that was up to the employers, and not to him.

Points of Order

After the PNQ had been finished a number of Labour Members, including finally Michael Foot, objected to the way in which the Government's policy had been announced. Ioan Evans said that four million workers were involved and that the Government had carried out a U-turn on a major issue. Parliament should have been informed by the Prime Minister or the Financial Secretary to the Treasury on Thursday, when both were answering Questions. In his view a Written Answer was not the right way to make an announcement of this sort.

Norman Atkinson said that the Home Secretary's remarks about cash limits had changed the framework of the negotiations, and he wanted to know how the negotiators were going to get the message.

/ Bob Cryer

Bob Cryer said that it was not good enough for Parliament to be trampled on in this way. Elected representatives were being treated with contempt when a Statement of this character was made by Written Answer.

David Winnick said that the 6 per cent limit was being discussed up and down the country but there was no chance to discuss it in the House of Commons. The Government should state its policy clearly so that everyone could know what was going on.

Michael Foot said that the way in which the announcement had been made was one of the most extraordinary he had ever heard in all his time in the House of Commons. The Opposition had thought that there might have been an attempt to remedy the situation today and he would have thought that the Government would make a Statement tomorrow.

Norman Atkinson repeated his point about the flexibility within the overall 6 per cent limit which the Home Secretary had indicated in his Answers, and said that this contradicted earlier Written Answers that had been given.

The Speaker brought the representations to an end by saying that no Point of Order was involved and that he had received no request for a Statement, but there may be further pressure yet.

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PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION: MONDAY 10 NOVEMBER

TO BE CHECKED
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AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Merlyn Rees: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if he will make a statement on the industrial action being taken by the Fire Brigades' Union.

MR. WILLIAM WHITELAW

I understand that, on Friday, negotiations in the National Joint Council for Local Authorities' Fire Brigades were adjourned at the request of the employees' side to enable them to consider a pay offer which had been made to them on behalf of fire authorities. The Executive Council of the Fire Brigades' Union is meeting this afternoon. Meanwhile, firemen in most brigades have indicated that they will answer only emergency calls, and some say that they are "working to rule". Since responses continue to be made to emergency calls, there appears at this stage to be no significant additional risk to the public from the present action but the situation will be kept closely under review.