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PRIME MINISTER

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Industrial Affairs: Fire Service Dispute

BACKGROUND

The Home Secretary will make an oral report to Cabinet on the firemens' dispute, covering both the pay aspects and the contingency plans which were discussed at Ministerial level by the Civil Contingencies Unit on Tuesday.

Pay

2. The Executive of the Fire Brigade's Union (FBU) have requested another meeting with the employers before resorting to strike action and the National Joint Council will meet tomorrow (i.e. Thursday) afternoon. The employers are divided and some, including the Scots, would like to honour the agreement. It is likely that they will have to concede the full 18.8 per cent if strike action is to be averted. While the cost could be accommodated within the overall Rate Support Grant cash limit, the danger is that it will be taken as a precedent which will make it much more difficult to contain subsequent settlements, such as for the local authority manuals, within the guidelines. The National Union of Public Employees and the TUC have already said that they will not regard the firemens' settlement as a special case.

3. The Home Secretary recommended in his minute to you of 17th November that, having made its position clear to the local authorities on this issue, the Government should now leave them to reach their own decisions on what to do next. Mr. Lankester's letter of 21st November records your agreement to this. I understand that the Home Secretary will not now suggest any different course, although he will point out that some hope of 6 per cent settlements for other groups in the near future might make it easier to resolve the firemens' dispute.

Contingency Planning

4. If the 18.8 per cent is not conceded tomorrow, the first one day strike is expected to be national rather than regional, but 24 hours notice will be given. Because of weekend overtime considerations, it seems unlikely to take place before Monday, 1st December. No notice will be given of subsequent one day strikes.



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5. By 28th November the full complement of nearly 800 Green Goddesses will be deployed. About 9,000 troops to man them will be ready for deployment and they will include about 70 teams (with 10 men in each) of specialist Servicemen equipped with breathing apparatus. The Goddesses will be able to quench or limit fires, but it is mainly the specialist teams who will be able to enter buildings and rescue occupants. The only troops who will be ready to deploy at 4 hours notice (plus deployment time) will be those required for a limited plan called Reinforced Scarab Minor (RSM), viz: the specialist teams plus enough double crews for 480 Goddesses. This should be enough for a one day strike even if national, since for that short period both crews could if necessary work simultaneously and thus man all 800 Goddesses. But the remaining double crews for the full Scarab plan, involving the permanent deployment of 800 Goddesses, will be ready at 12 hours notice if required.

6. The 9,000 troops for RSM will be deployed as soon as the firemen give their 24 hours notice of the first strike. But they will have thereafter to remain deployed, since no notice is to be given for subsequent strikes. The extra 8,000 troops for the full Scarab plan will not be deployed unless events prove that they are needed.

7. There are three main areas of difficulty:-

- (a) Even RSM will be very unpopular with the troops, since it may have to last for weeks or months during which time they will be uncomfortably accommodated and separated from their families and will have very little to do since strike days may be quite rare.
- (b) The Ministry of Defence are rightly insisting that the troops, who will be inexperienced and lacking in local knowledge, can only operate at the scene of a fire under the direction of a Fire Officer or someone else deputed by the Fire Authority to act in that role. Local authorities are claiming that this may be impossible, given that Fire Officers will (unlike 1977) be striking in sympathy with the firemen. The Home Secretary will try to talk them round.

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- (c) Local authorities seem unlikely to be willing to pay for two fire services simultaneously, i. e. the regular service (which will only occasionally be on strike) and the troops (who will have to remain permanently deployed).

8. The Paymaster General is ready with plans to inform the public both about the contingency arrangements and about fire risks, at an initial cost of £ $\frac{1}{4}$  million.

9. The danger of avoidable casualties during strike action is higher than in 1977, because Fire Officers will not be at work and because the Goddesses are ageing.

#### HANDLING

10. After the Home Secretary has made his statement you might ask the Secretary of State for the Environment and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to comment on the pay aspects. In particular:-

- (i) Is there any hope of 6 per cent settlements for other groups which might make it easier to resolve the firemens' dispute? - the answer is probably not.
- (ii) How long is the dispute likely to carry on and how might the deadlock be resolved?
- (iii) Does the Cabinet confirm that it is right for the Government to leave the local authorities to reach their own decisions on how to act?

11. You might then turn to the question of the contingency plans and invite:-

- (i) The Secretary of State for Defence to comment on the problems for the Forces.
- (ii) The Secretary of State for the Environment - and the Chancellor of the Exchequer - to comment on the costs to the local authorities of financing both the regular service and the troops on standby.
- (iii) The Paymaster General to explain his plans for informing the public about contingency arrangements and fire risks.

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CONCLUSIONS

12. In the light of the discussion you will wish to record conclusions:-
- (i) Endorsing the decision that the Government should leave it to the local authorities to resolve the firemens' pay settlement.
  - (ii) Inviting the Home Secretary to report the outcome of the meeting tomorrow afternoon and, as necessary, subsequent developments.

(Robert Armstrong)

26th November 1980

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