



Blind cc:- Mr Ingham
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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

21 January 1981

Presentation of Government Policy

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning with Lord Thorneycroft, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chancellor of the Duchy, the Chief Secretary and the Financial Secretary to discuss co-ordination between the Government and the Conservative Party on presentation of Government policy.

Lord Thorneycroft said that he had asked for the meeting because the way in which both the Government and the Party were presenting Government policy was causing him concern. This was not just a personal feeling of his but a reflection of views which were being put to him in his contacts with all sections of the Party. At the moment there was a widespread feeling that the Government was not explaining clearly and forcefully enough to the public what they were trying to do and why. People saw the Prime Minister and her Treasury colleagues standing firmly for the Government's strategy but they did not get the feeling that the rest of the Cabinet was united behind them. The impression which the public had was that the Cabinet consisted largely of individual Ministers defending their own Departmental positions. What was needed was a strategy for presenting Government policy; and this, in his view, would require each Cabinet Minister to play his part within the overall framework. He hoped that the Chancellor of the Duchy would be able to develop such a strategy, in consultation with other Ministers and with him. In this way both the Government and the Party would be able to put over to the public as a whole, and to the Party's supporters in particular, a clear and consistent exposition of the Government's policies.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he agreed with Lord Thorneycroft's analysis. The broad message which had to be conveyed should be a balanced one which did not shirk admitting the bad news such as the rising trend of unemployment and the prospective fall in living standards but which also pointed out the encouraging aspects of present policy such as the fall in the rate of inflation which offered hope for the future.

The Chancellor of the Duchy said that he felt strongly that the current presentation of Government policy was inadequate. The country was in a fog about the aims of Government policies and about how the Government intended to achieve them. The public did not understand what the Government was trying to do. He agreed

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with the Chancellor of the Exchequer that we should present the picture as it was - a mixture of problems and good news. At the moment we were not fitting all the pieces into a single, broad framework. He shared Lord Thorneycroft's view that we needed to develop a strategy for the presentation of Government policy, and because this task straddled so many Departmental boundaries, he thought that he would have to take the lead on it, drawing upon the help of his colleagues as necessary. If such a strategy was to be produced, Ministers would have to spend less time than they did now on today's and tomorrow's problems and would have to think much more about the broader, longer term issues. An approach of this kind would not, however, produce results quickly, and he would himself need time to think the problems through and to set action in hand. On a point of detail, he had reservations about the value of the weekend speaking notes for Ministers which his office circulated, and he believed that more might be achieved if he personally tried to direct in a more positive way the line to be taken by Ministers in public on the central issues of the day.

The Chief Secretary said that one of the Government's present handicaps was that the economic Ministers seemed to the public to be somewhat isolated from their colleagues. This was largely because the economic situation was so sensitive and complex that non-economic Ministers were chary about speaking about it. This attitude was understandable but it needed to be overcome. Ministers from all Departments should be encouraged to speak in public on economic subjects.

The Financial Secretary said that he agreed with Lord Thorneycroft and Mr Pym about the public's lack of understanding of what the Government was trying to do. The country needed, above all, to feel that the Government was competent; and being competent meant first, being seen to be united and second, being seen clearly to be on top of the job, whatever the obstacles in the way of achieving the Government's aims. But it was not enough for the Government to appear competent: the language in which Ministers presented Government policy was also crucial, for it was all too easy to use terms in speeches which left people in the kind of fog the Chancellor of the Duchy had mentioned.

In discussion there was agreement that we were not doing enough to get the terms of public debate on Government policy right. Many of the present yard-sticks of success were unfavourable to the Government, and they often reflected an approach to problems which had been overtaken by the march of events. This might well be true of, for example, the yard-sticks against which unemployment was discussed.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that they were agreed that the Government's and Party's presentation of Government policy was not altogether satisfactory at present, and a new strategy for the presentation of policy should be worked out as urgently as possible. The Chancellor of the Duchy should take the lead on this, in conjunction with Lord Thorneycroft and consulting his Ministerial colleagues as necessary. One element in this new strategy might be a requirement for more frequent keynote speeches by herself and other senior Ministers in which they could show how all the Government's policies fitted together into a coherent whole. Another element might be the use to be made of major television appearances by Ministers. A fully integrated strategy had underlain the Manifesto, and broadly the same approach was needed now.

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I am sending a copy of this letter to Lord Thorneycroft. I am also copying it to John Wiggins, Terry Mathews and Stephen Locke. I should be grateful if you and they would handle this letter with due discretion and, so far as possible, avoid copying it.

G. A. WHITMORE

R.A. Birch, Esq.,
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Office.

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