



Ref. A05265

PRIME MINISTER

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Cabinet: Civil Unrest

This brief deals largely with handling. Members of the Cabinet will be well aware of the general background and will have had copies of your Private Secretary's letters of 13 July reporting on your talks with the Metropolitan Police and your visit to Brixton and the Home Secretary's visits to Manchester and Liverpool.

2. You might first invite the Home Secretary to report on such (relatively minor) disturbances as have occurred since the weekend, and to give the Cabinet his assessment, and that of Chief Constables, of the success of the police in maintaining law and order. He will no doubt refer to police equipment (on which he made a statement to the House today) and to the strains on the prison system. It may suffice for the Cabinet to take note of the Home Secretary's report.

3. You will want to tell the Cabinet of the undertaking which you have entrusted to the Secretary of State for the Environment. The wording proposed for the Home Secretary's speech (which I have sent you separately) will provide a speaking note for that; but you may like to invite the Secretary of State for the Environment to tell the Cabinet how he proposes to set about his task.

4. It will be very important for you to say that he will be accompanied by only a very few officials from his own department, that he will need and be looking for the advice and support of the Regional Directors of Government departments in Merseyside, that he will have the full authority and backing of the Government, and that Regional Directors of other departments will be expected to accept his requests and instructions and give him advice and support as if he were their own Secretary of State. We can then write this into the Cabinet minutes, and it can be used as a basis for instructions to the staff concerned.

5. You will then wish to turn to the issues specifically identified at last week's Cabinet as requiring urgent consideration.

Changes in the Criminal Law. A New Riot Act? ✓

6. You will want the Home Secretary to introduce the discussion on the basis of his minute to you of 14 July. One question is the effect of any change in the law on what might happen on the streets and on the chances of securing convictions of rioters. The Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General can comment on the law and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on experience of riots in the Province. The second question is the symbolic effect of urgent legislation on public, parliamentary and party opinion. The Chancellor of the Duchy and the Chief Whip can comment on this, and on the time that would be needed to pass immediate legislation, to which presumably the Labour Party would be strongly opposed.

7. If the Cabinet is minded to pursue the option of immediate legislation, they will need to confirm the Home Secretary's view that a senior police officer (not a magistrate) should be able to give the order to disperse and that the offence should be a summary one. The Secretary of State for Scotland and the Lord Advocate can supply any Scottish comments.

8. If the Cabinet is minded to accept the Home Secretary's preference of "further consideration", you will wish to invite the Home Secretary to consult further with the other Ministers concerned and report back to the Cabinet in due course - presumably in September.

Avoidance of Court Delays ✓

9. The Lord Chancellor can report what action has been taken and how far proceedings against rioters will be able to jump the queue so far as the Crown Courts are concerned. (He is likely to point out that the initial responsibility of preparing cases for prosecution rests with the police).

Compensation ✓

10. The Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer can report on what can be done to grant speedy compensation under the Riot Damage Act. Is there likely to be a need to contemplate the amendment of that Act? The Secretary of State for the Environment may want to comment.



The Broadcasting Authorities

11. The Home Secretary can report on his recent approaches to them.

Conclusions

12. The Cabinet will need to take a clear decision on what the Home Secretary should say in the course of the debate about a modern version of the Riot Act. Beyond that, the Cabinet might take note of his report and invite him and the Secretary of State for the Environment to be guided by the points made in discussion in their speeches.

RIA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

15 July 1981