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NOTE OF LIAISON COMMITTEE MEETING, WEDNESDAY 20 OCTOBER 1982

Present

Prime Minister
Lord President of the Council
Secretary of State for Scotland
Secretary of State for Employment
Chairman of the Party
Chief Secretary, Treasury
Minister of State, Treasury (Mr Wakeham)
Minister of State for Defence, Armed Forces (Mr Blaker)
Mr Ingham, Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary
Mr Lawson, Marketing Director, Conservative Central Office
Mr Cropper, Conservative Research Department
Mr Ward, Lord President of the Council's office

1. Presentation of Defence Nuclear Policy

The Committee had before it a note by Conservative Research Department on the presentation of the Government's nuclear defence policy. The following points were raised in discussion:

(a) It was difficult, but necessary in presentational terms, to separate the conventional and nuclear elements of defence policies. It was the nuclear element which was predominant in political controversy and was likely to remain so; disarmament talks could not be expected to produce early results and 1983 would see the arrival of the first Cruise missiles to be based in this country.

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(b) Opinion polls suggested that a majority of the electorate were broadly in support of the retention of a proper military capability; but only a minority supported Trident even among the Government's own supporters.

(c) The unilateralist lobby had grown very strong and very influential. It seemed to be making an effective impact not only among the general public but also in the universities and at local authority level. A number of local authorities had declared themselves to be nuclear-free zones; in Strathclyde, the ruling Labour Council had used rate-payers' money to circularise households with a statement of its unilateralist views. It was essential to counter such campaigns effectively at the local level.

(d) In presenting its decision on Trident the Government had naturally set the issue in the context of the threat from the Soviet Union. Presentationally, there was however much advantage in drawing attention to the nuclear aspirations of non-European nations, such as Libya. The Government's defence policies needed to be presented in the round and set in a wider context than NATO alone.

(e) The work already done by the Ministry of Defence to counter the unilateralist lobby was noted, as also the activities of outside associations which had been set up for the purpose, or were prepared to help. But it was not clear that the Ministry of Defence exercise had achieved a sufficient impact. Some of its published material lacked appeal. The Government's message was not getting over to the general public or to opinion formers as strongly as it should. There appeared to be inadequate information officer effort devoted to this task. Some of the inter-Service arguments about resource allocation had proved damaging to the Government's position.

(f) CND publications were simple, emotive and effective; and they were pushed hard by their supporters at all levels. To redress the balance there was much to be said for harnessing the energy, imagination, and enthusiasm of the Party organisation notably the Young Conservatives and the Federation of Conservative Students. Such organisations had greater freedom to promote the case aggressively. They could properly undertake the sort of presentational campaign which it would be improper for a Whitehall Department to organise. But they lacked financial resources.

2. The Committee concluded that this area of presentation stood in urgent need of review, both as regards the substance of the message and the means by which it was projected. Renewed efforts had to be made to present the message in appealing and effective terms and to get it over strongly to opinion formers, especially in the universities, and at local level. The Party organisation would have ideas and practical assistance to offer. The Ministry of Defence needed to reassess the staff and financial resources allocated to this important job. The issues were sufficiently weighty to merit full Cabinet discussion. The Lord President of the Council was invited to Chair a group whose responsibility it would be to review all relevant aspects of the current presentational exercise; he would be assisted by the Chairman of the Party, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Secretary of State for Employment, and Mr Lawson. The group should aim to make a full report to the Committee as early as practicable. The paper under discussion should also be revised, and re-circulated, with copies of all the relevant Ministry of Defence publications. The Minister of State for Defence was invited to report back accordingly to the Secretary of State for Defence.

3. Work in hand

The Minister of State, Treasury, reported that a paper on the presentation of industrial policy should be available shortly. Mr Lilley had been invited to update the existing guidance note on economic policy, although this could not be finalised until after the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement in November. Finally, the Department of Energy's Ministers were working on the production of a paper for the Committee on the presentation of the civil nuclear energy programme.

4. Developments in the media

The Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary said that his paper discussed the implications of the introduction of Channel 4, and Breakfast television. Both were likely to attract minority audiences, Breakfast television probably being more influential politically since it would tend to attempt to influence the political reporting of the day. These developments would make substantial new demands on ministerial time but it was important to respond selectively and flexibly so as to lose no opportunity of presenting the Government's case. The paper made a number of recommendations as to how Ministers could best meet this new challenge; he drew particular attention to the recommendation that back-bench MPs be nominated as substitutes for Ministers when the latter were unavailable, and the likely necessity of moving eventually to the televised press conference format. In discussion, it was noted that these developments in the media could have implications for the timing of press releases or other announcements. But there was no need for any immediate decision on this aspect. It was agreed that the role of back-benchers was important. Central Office was now able

to provide television training. The Committee endorsed the recommendations in the paper and agreed that it should be distributed to Cabinet Ministers [Secretary's note: the paper was distributed at the following day's Cabinet]

5. Diary of Events

The Committee considered the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary's note. It was noted that there was a need for renewed emphasis by the Government on the need for pay restraint, although any such exercise must await developments in the coal mining industry. The economy could be expected to dominate the political scene and much attention would focus on the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement in November on public expenditure; indeed that statement could be an important vehicle presentationally. The Committee also noted the forthcoming changes in the basis on which unemployment statistics were collated and published, and briefly discussed the way ahead on the Home Office's draft immigration rules.

Distribution

Those present