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NOTE OF A MEETING HELD IN THE CABINET OFFICE ON 29th NOVEMBER, 1984, TO DISCUSS THE PRESENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY

P R E S E N T

The Rt. Hon. Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt. Hon. Leon Brittan QC MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt. Hon. Sir Keith Joseph MP
Secretary of State for Education
and Science

The Rt. Hon. John Biffen MP
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt. Hon. Norman Fowler MP
Secretary of State for Social
Services

The Rt. Hon. Tom King MP
Secretary of State for
Employment

The Rt. Hon. Peter Rees QC MP
Chief Secretary Treasury

The Rt. Hon. Lord Young of
Graffham, Minister without
Portfolio

The Rt. Hon. Kenneth Baker MP
Minister for Local Government

The Rt. Hon. Paul Channon MP
Minister for Trade

John Cope MP
Deputy Chief Whip

Bernard Ingham
Chief Press Secretary to the Prime Minister

SECRETARIAT

Mr. L. W. Lewis
Miss S. E. Wallace

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that the meeting was to consider the presentation of the Government's economic and social policy. It had before it the paper prepared by the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary which outlined the background to the exercise and set out various ways in which presentation of Government policy might be improved. The Group would be concerned with presentation of Government policy across the whole economic and social field and not simply with unemployment. It was imperative to meet the charge that the Government did not care about social distress and to show that it was not hard-faced. At present, the current miners' strike was to some extent masking any more general attack on Government policy but it was to be expected that when the strike ended other areas of Government policy would come under increasing public and media scrutiny. The job of the Group was to see whether the presentation of policy could be improved and, if so, in what ways.

THE CHIEF PRESS SECRETARY said that the essential ingredients of a successful presentation of Government policy across the whole economic and social field appeared to be, first, the production of

a regular diary of forthcoming Government announcements/events, etc., so as to identify all major opportunities for positive publicity; secondly, to organise Government backbenchers to speak on behalf of the Government both in and outside the House; and, thirdly, to seek to identify each week one particular theme on which the Government should concentrate its publicity efforts.

In discussion the following points were made:

- There was very considerable scope for Government backbenchers to be further involved in the presentation of Government policy. The large intake of new Members in 1979 and 1983 had, to some extent, led to a situation where many backbenchers were unused to capitalising on opportunities for defending Government policy. Nevertheless, it was clear that many backbenchers were very willing to be asked to support Government policy and it was essential for this source of support to be fully tapped. In particular, backbenchers needed to be helped to take full advantage of local radio where there were many opportunities for backbench MPs to get the Government's message across. In order to obtain the maximum benefit from this source, it might well be necessary to keep fairly sophisticated records of backbench MPs according to the regions/subject matters in which they were particularly involved. It was also important to recognise that backbench committees in the House of Commons could be effective channels of promoting Government policy.
- There was a major job of work to be done in changing the terms of the public debate from the resources being put in by Government to the results and outputs being obtained. All too often at present, the argument was solely in terms of cuts in resources without any reference to the results which were flowing from very large sums of public spending. At the same time, it had to be accepted that in some areas of Government policy results necessarily took time to emerge and in such areas the Government needed to be careful not to overstate its case. Overall, however, Ministers had to emphasise the positive side of the Government's policies and had to be prepared to take the offensive rather than relying always on defensive arguments and briefing. Ministers also needed to consider the timing of announcements; wherever possible good news had to be presented at a time when it was not immediately overshadowed by a bad news story.
- The Group recognised that the climate in which policies had to be presented was a difficult one. The Government would need to get its case across despite the welter of media attention devoted to resources and cuts in those resources; against a background of possible industrial disruption in parts of the public sector and against a background where opponents of Government policy were prepared to spend very large amounts of money in highly professional campaigns against particular areas of policy. This background, however, made the work of the Group the more important.

- The Group would need in particular to look at the difficulties created for presentation of Government policy by the strictures of the Budget and Autumn Statement timetables. Not only have these in recent years served to focus public debate on resources, and cuts in those resources, but the necessary secrecy attaching to both exercises meant that Ministers were often placed in the run-up to them in the position of not being able to deny the wilder speculations about what the Government might or might not be proposing. It might be that the move to more open debate in advance of the Budget had already been taken too far. At the same time more effort needed to be devoted to making the positive case for restraining public expenditure not only on the grounds that unrestrained expenditure was economically harmful but also on the grounds that unchanged public expenditure levels in all areas served only to ossify spending priorities and prevent these changing according to need and demand. More effort needed to be devoted to getting this message across in all sections of the media, not merely in the serious press. The likely success of the British Telecom share issue meant that far more people than ever before were likely to be interested in general economic arguments now that they were shareholders for the first time.
- The Group needed to recognise that the central issue on which the Government now stood open to attack was unemployment. This issue was likely to emerge even more forcefully once the miners' strike was over and it was necessary to recognise that there was a degree of feeling amongst Government supporters that cutting taxes needed to be combined with action on unemployment. At the same time, the message that the Government could not create jobs needed to be firmly stressed. It was also important, in relation to the wage costs argument, that the Government should be seen as supporting reduced unit costs rather than simply low wages as such.
- The suggestion to identify a theme a week on which presentation of Government policy might be concentrated was a sensible one although it had to be recognised that it could not be followed too rigidly. Ministers would need to be prepared to change a theme very quickly where events made this necessary and to seek the support of backbenchers in presenting policy accordingly.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, summing up the discussion, said that a clear consensus had emerged in favour of the Group seeking to improve the presentation of Government policy. The Group endorsed the main recommendations in the paper prepared by the Chief Press Secretary and, in particular, the suggestion that an official group should meet regularly to consider how best Government policy should be presented on the lines indicated in discussion. In the short term, the official group should make proposals to a further meeting of Ministers to be held before Christmas for a plan of campaign starting in the New Year. The official group should prepare short speaking notes on the subjects identified in the paper so that these could be presented to the next Ministerial meeting. Officials should also set in hand the preparation of a diary of events from

CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

which themes for presentation could be taken and this also should be presented to the next meeting of Ministers. The Deputy Chief Whip should at the same time consider how best to organise backbench support both regionally and by subject area along the lines agreed in discussion.

The Group took note, with approval, of the Lord President's summing up of the discussion.

Cabinet Office

29th November, 1984

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PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

29 November 1984

Dear Hugh

PRESENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL POLICY

I attach a note of this morning's meeting chaired by Lord Whitelaw.

I am sending copies to the Private Secretaries to the Secretaries of State for Education and Science, Environment, Social Services, Trade and Industry, and Employment, to the Lord Privy Seal the Chief Secretary, the Minister without Portfolio, the Chief Whip, and the Paymaster General, and to Bernard Ingham.

Yours Sincerely
R D Lawrence

R D LAWRENCE
Asst Private Secretary

H Taylor Esq
Private Secretary to the
Secretary of State
for the Home Department

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