



10 DOWNING STREET

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Sir A Parsons  
Blackburn

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From the Private Secretary

31 January 1983

Dear Richard,

Nuclear Weapons and Public Opinion

The Prime Minister chaired an ad hoc Ministerial meeting on the above subject at No. 10 Downing Street today. The meeting was attended by the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Sir Robert Armstrong. The meeting had before it minutes of 7 January and 13 January by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and a minute of 12 January by the Secretary of State for Defence.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that he believed it was desirable to establish a new structure for handling the preparation and public presentation of the Government's case on nuclear issues. He envisaged occasional meetings under the Prime Minister's chairmanship of the Ministers at today's meeting; a subsidiary group of Ministers which would consider day to day handling of issues; and a special unit of officials, directed by someone who was familiar with the media, which would devote full time attention to the issues, would think imaginatively about them and would maintain close contact with the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

There was also a need for greater activity through Party channels and in the constituencies. Opinion polls showed that 72% of the British public were against unilateralism. We needed to develop that feeling. It might also be useful to arrange a debate in the House of Commons on Government policy on nuclear issues.

The Home Secretary said that his Department had a major interest in these matters because of its involvement in civil defence policy. He agreed that a new structure was necessary. At present efforts to develop a civil defence policy were constrained by the argument that we should not provoke undue difficulties with the local authorities.

There was a need for new regulations laying on the local authorities an obligation to make plans for the contingencies of both nuclear and conventional war. Failure to impose such an obligation could open the Government to the charge of weakness.

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It was doubtful whether these regulations should impose a specific obligation on individuals who disapproved of Government policy to take part in the formulation of such plans.

The Prime Minister said that she believed that the Government would be wise to present its case in terms of nuclear deterrence. In any debate on the action to be taken in the case of nuclear war it would be much more difficult to win the argument. Thus she believed that the new regulations should seek to lay an obligation on local authorities to prepare for disasters of any kind.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that a reasonable civil defence policy could be regarded as an aid to our policy of deterrence in the sense that if the Soviet Union was under the impression that we were giving no thought to action in the event of nuclear war, the credibility of the deterrent would in their eyes be reduced.

The Defence Secretary warned that local authorities would seek to embarrass the Government by developing inflammatory scenarios as a response to their new obligation to prepare plans for emergencies.

The Home Secretary said that he believed the new regulations could be framed in such a way as to meet the point made by the Prime Minister. Their general sense would be to require local authorities to bring their regulations up to date for the purpose of emergencies of all kinds. He hoped that the regulations would be ready by March/April.

Reverting to the question of structure, the Defence Secretary said that he was not sympathetic to the idea of a Cabinet Office Committee at official level to coordinate action. The two lead Departments on these matters were the FCO and the MOD. He therefore thought that either the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary or he himself should chair the main Ministerial Committee. Within the Ministry of Defence the following action was planned. He hoped to deliver a speech at the Conference of Young Conservatives in two weeks' time setting out the Government's whole case on nuclear issues (it was agreed that the desirability of this would be looked at again in view of the Prime Minister's intention to devote part of her own speech at the Conference to nuclear matters). One full time official in the Ministry of Defence would be appointed to supervise work at official level. Detailed research would be carried out into the precise nature of the anxieties in British public opinion about nuclear policy. A comprehensive programme of speeches and articles would be drawn up, geared to particular events. He believed that the basic aim of the Government's publicity should be to exploit the general sentiment against one-sided disarmament to produce a better understanding of the case for Cruise and Trident.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster expressed the view that what was needed was a steady, sustained campaign. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament had about 30 people who did nothing else but plan activity. This could not be matched by a part-time Committee.

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Following further discussion, the Prime Minister concluded that a steady, sustained campaign was the right aim. There should be no sudden "launching".

With regard to structure, a Ministerial Committee should be established under the Chairmanship of the Secretary of State for Defence. The Secretary of State for Scotland should be invited to take part as should the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Mr. Hurd, Mr. Mayhew and Mr. Gummer. Mr. Ingham from No. 10 would also sit on this Committee.

The Secretary of State for Defence would arrange for the establishment of a group of officials, under MOD chairmanship, which would support the work of the Ministerial Committee.

Finally, the Ministerial Committee should consider further the specific ideas in paragraph 3 of the minute of 7 January by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

I am copying this letter to John Halliday (Home Office), Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Muir Russell (Scottish Office), Alex Galloway (Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Office), Emma Oxford (Mr. Gummer's Office, Department of Employment) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

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Richard Mottram, Esq.,  
Ministry of Defence.

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