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ACTION EUR-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 10249

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR  
TAGS: PGOV, PARM, INF, UK  
SUBJECT: BRITISH ELECTIONS: TORIES PLAN TO USE  
-- DEFENSE ISSUE TO WIN VOTES AT LABOR'S  
-- EXPENSE

REF: ✓ LONDON 9809

1. (CONFIDENTIAL ENTIRE TEXT.)
2. SUMMARY: TORIES WILL MAKE DEFENSE A KEY ISSUE IN THE COMING CAMPAIGN. THE REASON: A CONVICTION (SHARED BY MANY LABOR LEADERS) THAT LABOR'S DEFENSE POLICIES WILL LOSE VOTES. END SUMMARY.
3. THATCHER TOLD THE PARLIAMENT SHORTLY AFTER HER ELECTION ANNOUNCEMENT, THAT THERE "WOULD BE NO MORE IMPORTANT ISSUE IN THE COMING ELECTION THAN DEFENSE." SHE FOLLOWED UP WITH A BLAST AT LABOR'S DEFENSE POLICIES IN A RADIO INTERVIEW;  
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NOW MICHAEL HESELTINE HAS REINFORCED THE APPROACH WITH A MAJOR SPEECH TO THE TORY CONFERENCE IN SCOTLAND.

4. TORY THEMES ARE STRAIGHTFORWARD: STRONG EMPHASIS ON THE SOVIET THREAT AND THE NEED TO NEGOTIATE

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FROM STRENGTH, STRONG CRITICISM OF THE "GAMBLE" WHICH LABOR UNILATERALIST DEFENSE POLICIES WILL REPRESENT. THE CALCULATION IS THAT LABOR'S DEFENSE POLICIES ARE TOO EXTREME FOR BRITISH VOTERS (RECENT POLLS CONTINUE TO SHOW 3 TO 1 OPPOSITION TO UNILATERALISM), THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS WINNING THE DEBATE ON CRUISE (REFTEL), AND THAT PRESSURE ON DEFENSE WILL EXPOSE THE DIVISIONS IN LABOR'S OWN RANKS.

5. PRIVATELY, MANY LABOR LEADERS AGREE. THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND FORMULAE WHICH WILL PLAY DOWN UNILATERALISM WITHOUT SEEMING TO ABANDON POLICY PRONOUNCEMENTS: MICHAEL FOOT, WRITING IN THE MAY 13 GUARDIAN, CRITICIZES THATCHER FOR REFUSING TO COUNT BRITISH WARHEADS IN AN INF AGREEMENT, AND DESCRIBES LABOR'S POLICY AS AN ATTEMPT TO "FORCE A PAUSE" IN THE NUCLEAR ARMS RACE. IN A TEPID PERFORMANCE, HEALEY ENDORSED FOOT'S VIEW AND ARGUED THAT CRUISE WOULD MULTIPLY VERIFICATION PROBLEMS. BOTH, HOWEVER, WERE SILENT ON LABOR'S CALL FOR REMOVAL OF US NUCLEAR BASES FROM BRITAIN -- AN ELEMENT OF THE LABOR PLATFORM WHICH IS LESS EVIDENT NOW IN THE STATEMENTS OF LABOR LEADERS.

6. SOME LABOR LEADERS ARE MORE CANDID. WHEN ASKED ABOUT DEFENSE ON A RADIO INTERVIEW PROGRAM MAY 12, ROY HATTERSLEY RESPONDED: "WHY DON'T YOU ASK ME ABOUT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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90 PERCENT OF THE LABOR PROGRAM WITH WHICH I AGREE."

7. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY KEY LABOR SOURCES THAT ADMINISTRATION ACTION -- THE INTERIM INF PROPOSAL, ENDORSING THE SCOWCROFT REPORT, AND MORE MODERATE PRONOUNCEMENTS ON ARMS CONTROL -- ARE MAKING IT HARDER FOR LABOR TO BUILD ON MIDDLE CLASS FEAR OF AMERICA'S NUCLEAR IRRESPONSIBILITY. IN ADDITION, LABOR IS UNABLE TO EXPLOIT THE DUAL KEY ISSUE, BECAUSE DOING SO WOULD BE AN ADMISSION THAT DEPLOYMENTS WILL TAKE PLACE, AND BECAUSE DUAL KEY WOULD MEAN MICHAEL FOOT'S FINGER ON THE TRIGGER, A PROSPECT WHICH PLEASES NEITHER FOOT NOR OTHERS.

8. EMBASSY COMMENT: THE WAY THE TORIES ARE EMPHASIZING AND LABOR BACKING AWAY FROM THE UNILATERALIST ELEMENTS OF LABOR'S POLICY IS THE BEST SIGN YET OF HOW BRITISH POLITICIANS JUDGE THE TREND IN THE NUCLEAR DEBATE.  
LOUIS