

Heseltine

PRIME MINISTER

This is a personal note about the political situation post Mr. Heseltine's resignation, setting out my own views.

What matters is not to lose sight of the broad strategic objective which is for the Government as quickly as possible to reassert an image of unity and decisiveness.

The most damaging effect of the Heseltine affair has been to show the Government in serious disarray and you looking, uncharacteristically, as though you are not in control. This is bound to show itself in the polls for a bit.

But it will blow over because he did not resign on a clear cut issue. It will be seen much more as a personality clash.

The Opposition tactics next week will be uncertain: they will not know whether to attack you for being too tough or too weak. David Owen will probably have a go at both. Your response should be the simple assertion of collective responsibility; that on this issue the Cabinet was united; and that the only dissenter was Mr. Heseltine who would not accept the Cabinet's decision.

Longer term you will have to consider Mr. Heseltine's tactics on the backbenches. The press will be waiting eagerly to pounce on any utterance however slight which he makes. If I were him I would lie low for a short time only and then chose those issues where he imagines he has a 'broader appeal' than you. Overall his broad theme will probably be "we should end abdication by Government. In a modern society Government has a role to play to make people's lives better." He will then go on the economy, infrastructure, inner cities, unemployment and the alleged link between deprivation and crime. His tactical dilemma is that the more strongly he attacks the Government, the more divisive a figure he will appear and the Tory Party does not like division. Obviously, we must avoid any continuation of a "Thatcher-Heseltine row". But the Government ought to consider how it can pre-empt some of the attacks we can expect from him.

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I am not worried about the attack on your so-called "style of Government". People want Prime Ministers to be in charge and they expect that of you. Better to be strong than to be weak.

I repeat: my view is that what matters is doing everything we can to show an image of unity and decisiveness.

S.

STEPHEN SHERBOURNE

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