

010
CONFIDENTIAL

P 02039

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

PRISON OFFICERS' INDUSTRIAL ACTION

As instructed by the Prime Minister, I held a meeting of the official level Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) this morning. I summarise below the main conclusions we reached and the issues which I think you will need to consider at your meeting with Ministers this evening.

Current Situation

2. After the serious troubles last night (ranging from minor disturbances to the virtual destruction of Northeye prison in Sussex), the situation appears to be stabilising and the Prison Officers' Association (POA) have announced suspension of industrial action with immediate effect in order to allow talks to resume. This followed some signs that prison officers, shocked by the night's events, were beginning to have second thoughts about their action.

3. It is too soon, however, to judge how far the POA move will progress matters. They have suspended, not called off, their action; and there is no sign that they are willing to discuss the dispute on the basis of the Home Secretary's rather than their own agenda (which in effect amounts to retention of their stranglehold on the management of the prison service). Our judgement is, therefore, that the situation in England and Wales remains very unstable; and that much will now depend on the response of the Home Secretary who is planning to see the POA later this evening.

4. You will wish to consider the nature of the Home Secretary's response. There are two broad options:

CONFIDENTIAL

(i) to seek to resume bilateral talks on the previous basis;

(ii) to offer a new initiative, such as an independent enquiry.

Option (i) could prove to be sterile, given the POA's attitude so far. But the gravity of the events they have precipitated might cause them to modify their approach. Option (ii) could move the discussion on to the Government's agenda and, if done, ought to be done quickly. But any enquiry of this kind of this kind would have wider implications on the pay and related fields and I am sure that you would wish to see these examined, and a detailed set of proposals formulated, before talking this further.

Police Cooperation

5. Each Prison Governor has joint contingency plans with his local Chief Police Officer. Normally Home Office approval is required to activate them, but in extremis independent action can be taken. The plans activated yesterday in general seem to have worked well; and the National Information Centre has been set up at New Scotland Yard (as in 1980-81) to collate information and, if necessary, to enable mutual aid to be organised on a national basis (though this has not been necessary so far).

6. Our judgement is that the arrangements between the prison authorities and the police are adequate to cope with the present and foreseeable situation, although there could be particular strains in Northern Ireland this coming weekend if prison officers again withdraw cooperation. I have asked the Northern Ireland Office to consider further the implications of this.

CONFIDENTIAL

Military Assistance

7. Rolleston prison in Wiltshire could be made operational (to take 375 low category prisoners) in some 8 days (minimum). A second camp (not yet identified) would take 3 to 4 weeks.

8. There are two immediate decisions to take:

(i) whether MOD should press ahead with whatever action is necessary to make Rolleston available and to identify and make available a second camp;

(ii) whether emergency legislation (an Imprisonment (Temporary) Legislation Bill) should also be introduced at once in order to provide powers inter alia to hold prisoners in temporary camps.

9. We do not think either course of action is yet necessary.

The Home Office have identified spare accommodation within existing prisons amounting to some 2,000 places. Even on pessimistic assumptions about the usability of these places, and the intake of new and displaced prisoners, this should give at least a month's grace. This would provide sufficient time in which to introduce and pass the legislation (requiring 3 days unless exceptional procedures are invoked) if it proved necessary. A further important consideration is that I assume the Government will not want to be seen to be taking such a drastic step (a sign of panic?) unless the situation absolutely warrants it.

10. If, however, the position seriously deteriorated, the legislation would be an important weapon since, in addition to the power described above, it would also provide powers to:

(a) remand prisoners in custody in their absence;

CONFIDENTIAL

- (b) reverse a Court's decision to remand in custody; and
- (c) prevent Courts committing to prison those such as fine defaulters.

11. I therefore recommend that at this stage action should be confined to the following:-

(i) MOD should discreetly take all internal contingency action necessary to enable Rolleston to be made operational in the shortest possible time, and should identify now a second camp and the steps that would need to be taken to make it operational;

(ii) the Home Office should ensure, in consultation with the other Departments concerned, tht the draft Imprisonment (Temporary Provisions) Bill is ready for immediate introduction if required;

(iii) the Northern Ireland Office should similarly bring their own equivalent legislation to maximum preparedness.

Industrial Relations Legislation and Related Action

12. We have considered two possible sanctions for use by the Government:-

(i) exploiting the POA's lack of immunity under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974;

(ii) withdrawing the POA's "check off" facility (ie deduction of union dues at source from salary).

CONFIDENTIAL

Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974

13. The background to this was set out in the Home Secretary's minute of 17 April to the Prime Minister. In brief, the Government could exploit an error in the drafting of the Act to seek an injunction against the POA executive or named individuals in England and Wales to stop them inducing a breach of contract (the loophole does not exist in Scotland). Although there are arguments that the POA could deploy against it (not least the unintentional error in the drafting), our legal advice is that the injunction would probably be granted, provided application for it were not too long delayed. It is difficult, however, to judge the effects of this on the dispute. On balance we think the POA would probably obey it; they are not a rich union (their disposable funds probably amount to around £1/2 million and they have no strike fund), and - despite the evidence of the past 24 hours - they are likely still to respect the law. But the threat of use is probably more potent than use of the weapon itself, which would raise wider questions of the union's future powers and status and also invite linkage with the GCHQ situation.

14 I therefore recommend that this weapon should not be used or openly threatened now; but that it should be held in reserve as a possibility and the Home Office, in conjunction with the other Departments concerned, should be asked to consider more fully the implications of using it and report back to Ministers urgently.

Check Off Facility

15. Withdrawal of this could hit the POA hard. It has not, however, been used before in such a dispute; and there are some doubts about whether it would be open to legal challenge by individual union members claiming a contractual right to it. It is not, therefore, an option for immediate use.

CONFIDENTIAL

16. The possibility should, however, certainly not be discarded and I recommend that the possibility and implications of using it should be covered by the urgent study of the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act loophole recommended in paragraph 14 above.

Territorial and Other Considerations

17. For completeness I should note the following further considerations:-

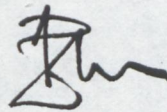
(i) Scotland: the dispute has not so far spread to the Scottish Prison Officers' Association (SPOA) which is in negotiation with the Scottish Office. But the atmosphere is uneasy (their concerns are the same as those of the POA) and if the situation in England deteriorated, the trouble could spread to Scotland;

(ii) Northern Ireland: Although there is as yet no formal dispute, Northern Ireland prison officers are acting in sympathy with the POA. There has not so far, however, been serious trouble. In some respects the situation is, for obvious reasons, potentially more dangerous; but the prisons in Northern Ireland are in general in better condition and less crowded than those on the mainland. The Northern Ireland Office are hopeful that the situation will be containable over the coming holiday weekend;

(iii) DHSS: although this is not an immediate problem, difficulties would arise if the POA took industrial action in the special hospitals (Broadmoor etc - they have so far agreed not to involve them), or local authorities were in time forced to find accommodation for juvenile delinquents who would otherwise be remanded to prison.

CONFIDENTIAL

18. I am copying this minute to the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Employment the Chief Secretary, the Attorney General, the Chief Whip, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, the Minister for the Environment, Countryside and Local Government, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr MacKay), the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales (Mr Wyn Roberts), the Parlliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health and Social Security (Mr Whitney), and to Mr Norgrove (No 10) and Sir Brian Cubbon (Home Office).



J B UNWIN
(Deputy Chairman,
Civil Contingencies Unit)
Cabinet Office
1 May 1986

- Taking steps to prepare two camps.
 - Estlin
 - 2nd get to be finally identified
 - + Dushoff

- Enquiry - work it up

- TWLRA - work it up: Wednesday would probably be the latest.

NOTE work and ballots.

File: Seen
by PM

TOL 012238²

Y

012015Z MAY 86

FM CABINET OFFICE
TO AIRBORNE 0 IMMEDIATE
BT

CONFIDENTIAL
AIRBORNE 001

FOLLOWING FOR PRIME MINISTERS PARTY. FOR ATTENTION OF MR WICKS.
PRISON OFFICERS' DISPUTE

THE CONTINGENCIES UNIT MET THIS AFTERNOON UNDER THE LORD
PRESIDENT'S CHAIRMANSHIP. IT WAS DECIDED:

- (I) TO MAKE BOTH ARMY CAMPS READY TO RECEIVE PRISONERS AS
QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AND TO ANNOUNCE THAT THIS WAS BEING
E DONE (IT WOULD ANYWAY QUICKLY BECOME PUBLIC)=
- (II) NOT YET TO INTRODUCE THE LEGISLATION WHICH WOULD ALLOW THE
CAMPS TO BE USED - THAT COULD IF NECESSARY BE ENACTED WITHIN
1-3 DAYS=
- (III) A PAPER SHOULD BE PREPARED FOR YOUR RETURN ON THE
GENERAL POSITION, THE POSSIBILITY OF AN INQUIRY INTO
MANNING ETC, AND THE OPTIONS FOR ACTION AGAINST THE POA.
(THE ATTORNEY GENERAL FELT THAT A DECISION WOULD BE NEEDED
VERY QUICKLY UA POSSIBLY ON WEDNESDAY NEXT WEEK - IF THE LEGAL
LOOPHOLE IS TO BE EXPLOITED, OTHERWISE THE RISK OF AN ADVERSE
COURT RULING WOULD BE INCREASED.)

SIR BRIAN CUBBON IS MEETING THE POA TOMORROW (FRIDAY) MORNING TO
TALK ABOUT PROCEDURES FOR TALKS.

NO OTHER DEVELOPMENTS HAVE BEEN REPORTED.

DAVID NORGROVE.
GRS 00300
NNNN

Mr. Biffen: I shall certainly look into the matter and refer it to whichever of my right hon. Friends is most relevant to deal with it.

Mr. Michael Latham (Rutland and Melton): Is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the way in which the House discusses the grave events that occur day after day in Northern Ireland since, with one shining exception, the Ulster Unionists will not come to the Chamber? Since the Assembly is not working, is it not incumbent on the House to discuss the matters properly?

Mr. Biffen: The House continues to discuss the Province properly. It continues, traditionally, with Northern Ireland Question Time and it continues to deal with Northern Ireland orders as necessary. Whether hon. Members from the Province participate in our debates is essentially a judgment that they make having regard to their electorate.

Mr. Laurie Pavitt (Brent, South): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that, for two years, by means of petitions, early-day motions and questions, and by badgering him at business question time, I have tried to keep open the railway station serving Wembley stadium? May I thank and congratulate him, since last week he assured me that he would speak with great force to the Secretary of State for Transport, and yesterday British Rail decided that it would give in and not close the station at Marylebone.

Mr. Biffen: I do not deserve one shred of the hon. Gentleman's praise, but I happily accept it.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the request from hon. Members on both sides of the House for an early debate on the implications of the Chernobyl disaster? Will he give us an opportunity to consider the grotesque double standards of the anti-nuclear protesters who, when they wanted to demonstrate, chose as the first port of call not the Soviet embassy but the Department of Energy? Will he give the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) the opportunity to explain why he was with the protesters?

Mr. Biffen: As I have said, such a debate would be very educative, not least because it would enable us to have some insight into the motives of those who protest against civilian nuclear power. However, the House will have the opportunity in the near future to discuss nuclear power in respect of the Soviet disaster as well as our domestic nuclear programme. I hesitate to make any commitment beyond that.

Mr. Robert Parry (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister when she returns from her visit to the far east if she will make a statement to the House on democracy and human rights in South Korea and about the peaceful unification of the peninsula, which is official Government policy?

Mr. Biffen: It is the custom of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to make statements to the House following meetings such as the one in prospect. I shall draw to her attention the suggestion that she might cover those topics, among many others.

Mr. Ivan Lawrence (Burton): May I invite my right hon. Friend to reconsider his advice that questions on the Russian disaster can be subsumed in a possible debate on foreign affairs? If that happened, there would be

insufficient time for the House to consider our relationship with the United States, our relationship with Europe, the problems in the middle east and southern Africa, our relationship with the Association of the South East Asian Nations and human rights on an international basis, and the debate on foreign affairs would become a mockery. I ask my right hon. Friend to consider seriously having a separate debate soon on the disaster in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Biffen: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly fair point, but, of course, it is a point that is frequently made about foreign affairs debates which, by virtue of their diversity, have to encompass a number of highly important topics. As I say, it is a matter for consideration through the usual channels and I do not want to raise expectations which I cannot fulfil.

Mr. James Callaghan (Cardiff, South and Penarth): The Leader of the House invites those of us who are retiring to linger and savour the atmosphere. Is he aware that the smell reaching most of us is that of the Government's decay?

Mr. Biffen: Well, it all depends where one sits.

Mr. John Watt (Slough): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a short debate on our policy towards bank holidays? In view of the Labour party's recent attempt to hide the red flag under the cloak of its new grey image, would it not be timely for the House to have the chance to consider scrapping the May bank holiday, which is an alien celebration of Marxist Socialism, and putting bank holidays on our national saints' days which can be days of patriotism?

Mr. Biffen: I just have a feeling that that is the kind of topic which, suggested tentatively and lightheartedly ahead of an election, causes more irritation than enough. I shall bear in mind what my hon. Friend is urging upon me, but I am not aware of any great public desire to see further change.

Mr. Greville Janner (Leicester, West): Has the attention of the Leader of the House been drawn to the allegations in *The Guardian* this week concerning the deaths of two British prisoners of war—a Mr. Fishwick, who died in a concentration camp, and a Sergeant John Dryden, who was handed over to the Germans and disappeared—and, in particular, the allegation that Dr. Kurt Waldheim was involved in those deaths? As it has proved impossible to obtain any information from the Government on that matter, will he be good enough to inquire from his colleagues whom one should ask about it; and, if no answer is forthcoming, may we have a statement or a debate on the matter?

Mr. Biffen: I see no particular profit in having a debate or statement on that topic or getting involved in the controversies that now rage between the World Jewish Congress and the supporters of Dr. Waldheim, but I shall consider the point that the hon. and learned Gentleman has made.

Mr. Peter Bruinvels (Leicester, East): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the staggering growth in driving licence abuse and that in 1984-85 141,701 people were convicted of driving licence fraud? As more than 30 million driving licences are now in existence, none with photographs, will my right hon. Friend find time for the House to debate the urgent need to stop people who have

Mr. Peter Bruinvels]

been banned, are under age, or who do not even have the right to drive, from driving?—*[Interruption.]* This is a serious matter.

Mr. Biffen: Road accidents are undoubtedly a subject of the utmost seriousness, but I should have thought that at the moment the level of general controversy is at such a pitch that I would not willingly wish to add to it with the proposition of putting photographs on driving licences because that would lead to considerable public debate and acrimony. However, my hon. Friend has made a serious point, and I shall take it up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Mr. William Cash (Stafford): In view of the importance to our commercial success of matters relating to copyright and intellectual property, will my right hon. Friend consider arranging a debate on the White Paper on that matter?

Mr. Biffen: That is one of the many factors that I have to take into account when considering a forward programme. It is a most important topic. I only regret that I cannot offer a debate in the near future.

Prison Officers (Dispute)

3.59 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Douglas Hurd): As I undertook in the House last night, I will, with permission, make a further statement on the situation in the prisons.

I reported to the House last night on events at Lewes and Northeye prisons. Disruption continued there during the night, but the situation has now been brought under control, though at both establishments, and particularly at Northeye near Bexhill, there has been extensive damage to buildings. Police intervention was necessary at Bristol to regain control of one wing of the prison, and at Erlestoke youth custody centre, near Devizes, some 40 trainees made a mass breakout and some 16 are still at large. The other serious incident was at Wymott, near Chorley, where there was a major disturbance but where staff gradually were able to regain control. A number of lesser incidents took place at 12 other prison establishments.

The situation in all establishments has now been brought back under control. I want to take this opportunity, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House did a few moments ago, to pay tribute to hard-pressed prison governors, those prison staff who remained at their posts, and the members of the police and fire services who have helped to restore the situation.

There will need to be an inquiry into these events. Its form and scope will have to be compatible with any police investigation into alleged offences, and I will keep the House informed.

I have taken immediate steps to try to ensure that, now that order has been restored, it can continue to be preserved. Prison governors are in touch with their local chief officers of police about the situation in their establishments. After consultation with me the acting president of the Association of Chief Police Officers has opened the national information centre at New Scotland Yard to collate and disseminate information relating to the police involvement in the prisons dispute. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has ordered preparations in case military camps are needed to house prisoners as a result of the destruction of prison accommodation. Arrangements have been made to ensure a co-ordinated response by all Government Departments to the present difficult situation.

Although some of the violent action by prisoners may have been imitative, there is little doubt that the occasion for it was the overtime ban instituted by the national executive committee of the Prison Officers Association as part of its dispute about manning levels with the Prison Department. This both increased the prospect of trouble in the prisons and reduced the resources available to deal with it. I believe that not only the public but many members of the prison service, including many members of the Prison Officers Association, will have been appalled by the events of the last 24 hours.

I therefore welcome the decision of the national executive committee of the POA to suspend its industrial action to allow talks at the Home Office to take place. The POA asks in its statement for a reciprocal gesture, asking us to allow staff to work normally and to lift threats of suspension. There should be no difficulty about that. Staff temporarily relieved from duty, that is to say suspended, can lift their own suspension by agreeing to work

normally. We cannot start substantive negotiations until the threat of industrial action has been removed. But I have invited the NEC to discussions at the Department with a view to the simultaneous calling off of the industrial action and the institution of discussions about the agenda for the future which I set out in my letter of 22 April to the POA general secretary, Mr. Evans.

The House will recall that this agenda involved: a rapid settlement of this year's pay claim, including the outstanding question of a reduction in the working week for prison officers; the immediate payment of tax compensation on housing allowance for 1985-86; and bringing forward as fast as possible—this is the crucial point—work on new shift systems and pay arrangements for detailed discussion with the POA, with a view to the new arrangements being in place by April 1987.

I very much hope that the national executive committee will respond positively and constructively to this package and that the talks I have set in hand will find a way through present difficulties. I shall do everything I can to ensure that the control which has been regained in our prisons is maintained and that a constructive way forward is found to settle this destructive dispute.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): The whole country has been appalled at the savagery of last night's events, their widespread nature and the anarchy which has prevailed. We deplore and condemn the violence and would like more information as soon as it is available about the report of two deaths at Northeye.

What we need and what the nation demands is an early resolution to this dispute. It is here that, especially after last night's events, which could and should have been foreseen by him, the Home Secretary has an inescapable responsibility. The Prison Officers Association has taken a constructive and statesmanlike step by suspending industrial action. Therefore, it is now for the Home Secretary to respond by facilitating discussions that could end the dispute. The right hon. Gentleman may not be aware that the national executive of the Prison Officers Association is not free unilaterally to abandon industrial action. A ballot was held under its own constitution, as well as under the Government's employment legislation, and a ballot is required for abandoning industrial action.

Following the last dispute in the prisons in 1980-81, when industrial action was taken, the court ruled that for industrial action to be abandoned the consent of the membership of the Prison Officers Association must be obtained in a similar way to which it was obtained when the action started. That was a ruling in the High Court by Lord Justice Browne-Wilkinson. Therefore, only the membership of the POA can remove that mandate for industrial action. For the membership to be able to do that, it needs to have a package from the Home Secretary placed before it for consideration.

I strongly urge the Home Secretary to instruct his officials immediately to get in touch with the NEC of the Prison Officers Association so that they can discuss the basis for a possible agenda for talks. Such a step might help to ease the way for the process that will end the dispute. I hope that the Home Secretary will take such constructive action urgently because a renewal of last night's arson and anarchy is too grim for anyone to contemplate.

Mr. Hurd: I welcome the change in the tone of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks since last night. He asked

me a specific and serious question about reports of deaths at Northeye. He is perfectly correct: there were such reports. They came from a prisoner coming out. Since the authorities regained control at Northeye, they have made two thorough searches of the premises and have not been able to find anything to substantiate those reports. Obviously if there is any change it will have to be made known at once.

As I understand it, the right hon. Gentleman is completely accurate in the account he has just given of the requirements, not of the law of the land or the statute, but of the rules of the Prison Officers Association. That is a matter which can perfectly well be discussed in the procedural talks I have suggested.

I hope that the House and the right hon. Gentleman will understand why, in my view, it is not possible to start substantive negotiations until the threat of industrial action has been removed. On Monday I found myself in procedural discussions with the POA and there was talk of suspending action then. However, particularly dangerous action had got under way at Gloucester at that time and I have since learned that it was instigated by the POA. Therefore, at that time there was a strong feeling, which I shared, that one cannot have substantial negotiations under those conditions. That is why I have made the suggestion, which I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will recognise as having merit, of going for a simultaneous understanding for the removal of industrial action—taking account of his comments about the rules—and agreements on methods to start discussions of the agenda which I set out to Mr. Evans in my letter of 22 April.

Mr. Leon Brittan (Richmond, Yorks): Will my right hon. Friend agree that, in view of the vastly increased resources spent on the prison service by the Government, it is entirely reasonable to ensure that those resources are properly managed and not wasted on excessive overtime or unreasonable and unjustifiable working practices? Therefore, does my right hon. Friend agree that the POA is perfectly entitled to expect to take part in discussions on how that objective should be achieved and that the procedure my right hon. Friend has suggested is a proper way to do that?

Does my right hon. Friend also agree that, after what happened last night, the POA will forfeit the support of those most sympathetic to it unless the threat of industrial action is not just suspended but clearly withdrawn?

Mr. Hurd: I am most grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend. He has set out the position very succinctly, and I agree with all the points that he has made.

Mr. Roy Jenkins (Glasgow, Hillhead): Clearly, all right hon. and hon. Members wish the prospects for the talks well. Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that he was clearly right to stand firm on the position that it must be the prison governors, subject to the rules of the Home Office, endorsed by this House, and not the Prison Officers Association, who are responsible for running the prisons? However, will he also bear in mind that when he complains about the previous tone of comments from the Opposition and elsewhere there is one person, above all, who is responsible for the politicisation of the law and order issue, and that is the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the chairman of the Conservative party. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot restrain his raucous colleague, he must expect the interchange to be both ways.

Mr. Hurd: I do not read my right hon. Friend's remarks in that way at all. My right hon. Friend is drawing attention to the results, in his view, of some of the social legislation that was introduced by the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Hillhead (Mr. Jenkins). I quite understand that the right hon. Gentleman may be sensitive about that, but I do not think that it has anything to do with this issue.

Sir Edward Gardner (Fylde): Will my right hon. Friend agree that this quite disastrous dispute has been brought about at a time when record sums of money have been spent by the Government on the prison service, that since 1979 the budget for the prison service has risen by 85 per cent., and that this enormous increase in money spent has been accompanied by an increase of 18 per cent. in the number of prison officers?

Mr. Hurd: Yes, indeed, and that at a time when the prison population has risen by 12 per cent. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) was badly needed by the Leader of the Opposition a few minutes ago when the Leader of the Opposition produced, unwittingly, figures that showed that the ratio of staff to prison population had substantially improved during the lifetime of this Government.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Will the Home Secretary also agree that, if he were to cast his eyes back to the reply that he gave to me on Monday of this week with regard to the prison population, he would find that the number of persons on short term sentences who have been paroled has risen by about 400 per cent.? Prison numbers as a whole have risen disastrously over the last few years, which in effect means that those being detained in prison are the longer serving prisoners for whom there is no hope of parole in many cases, as his predecessor indicated, in the long term. Therefore will the Home Secretary agree that this has increased the pressures on the officers who have to guard these prisoners and look after their welfare? As a result of the absence of welfare services and recreational and other facilities, the POA has a perfectly credible case in seeking an increase in the number of prison officers in order to provide adequate and proper care for long-term prisoners that has been deliberately damaged by the policies of this Government.

Mr. Hurd: The balance of the prison population changes as we implement what seems to me to be the very sensible policy of keeping in prison longer those who have received particularly severe sentences for particularly heinous crimes. However, as the hon. Gentleman will know and as the figures show, the aim of our spending programme, as regards the increase in both prison places and prison officers, is not just to keep pace with the prison population but to tackle the problem of overcrowding.

Mr. Mark Carlisle (Warrington, South): In view of the fact that what happened last night in the prisons must have caused great concern not only to people in this country but to members of the Prison Officers Association, is it not best that we should all welcome the fact that the POA has decided unilaterally to suspend its action and wish well the talks to which my right hon. Friend has referred?

Mr. Hurd: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend. I have tried to put forward a procedural suggestion, which is, I hope, in line with what he has said.

Ms. Clare Short (Birmingham, Ladywood): I think that the Home Secretary is failing to take full responsibility for a situation that has been building up for a very long time. I invite him to visit Winson Green prison in my constituency and to take with him the Prime Minister, who clearly does not understand the situation either. No education classes have been held and no workshops have been open in Winson Green because of the strain and the pressure on the Prison Officers Association.

We cannot look simply at the rise in the prison population; we have to look also at the rise in the remand population. That requires far more work because of visits to court every day. The Prison Officers Association has appealed for months for the Home Secretary's support to reorganise the prisons so that the prison officers are able to work reasonably and so that conditions for prison officers and prisoners can be improved. These appeals have been rejected. That is the cause of the build up of this great tension. It will not be resolved without talks that should be entered into unconditionally.

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Lady is right when she says that the story goes back a long time. Indeed, it goes back to the time when no money was being spent either on staff or on prisoners. The situation was deteriorating, without any remedy being sought.

The hon. Lady is also right to draw attention to the problem of the remand population. She will know of the efforts that we are making to reduce the remand population—for example, by experimenting with time limits on trial delays. I am very conscious of that problem. We are anxious to discuss these matters, and proposals to deal with them, with the POA, but on the basis which the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Hillhead (Mr. Jenkins) agreed—that we should consult, but that, if agreement cannot be reached, then management decides.

Mr. Charles Morrison (Devizes): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the fact that the situation at Erlestoke, in my constituency, would have been much worse if it had not been for the action and dedication of the prison governor, some members of the staff and police from Hampshire, I believe, as well as from Wiltshire. As prison officers are employed by the prison service, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is high time that they lived up to their sense of duty and responsibility and negotiated responsibly, particularly as their salary level, according to the national earnings survey, is now second only to that of newspaper printers?

Finally, in order to reassure members of the public who live in the vicinity of prisons, will my right hon. Friend review the provisions for security in prisons, in case of an emergency, so that the chances of future escapes are less likely? Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the troubles with some prisons—and this is true of Erlestoke—is that it appears to have been built for nice people but that some people inside it are very nasty?

Mr. Hurd: I agree with all of my hon. Friend's points. I certainly agree that the inquiry which, as I have said, will be necessary will have to encompass, in one form or another, his point about security in places like Erlestoke.

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): As the Home Secretary has told us that it has been necessary for the police to be involved at several prisons during the past 24 hours, will he also tell us whether any of these police officers have been issued with guns?

Mr. Hurd: No, not to my knowledge.

Sir John Farr (Harborough): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most important statistics must be the relationship between prisoners and staff? How does that relationship today compare with the relationship in 1979? While my right hon. Friend is dealing with that question, will he also please confirm that the death at Gartree was in no way connected with the dispute?

Mr. Hurd: Yes, I can confirm, according to the information that I have received, that the death which regrettably occurred at Gartree last night had nothing to do with the prison dispute. I missed the crucial point of my hon. Friend's first question.

Sir John Farr: I asked my right hon. Friend about the relationship between staff and prisoners in 1979 and how it compared with the position today.

Mr. Hurd: The mathematical relationship has improved. I do not have the figures in the exact form that my hon. Friend wants, but it flows from the figure that has already been mentioned in the House: that during our time in office the number of prison officers has increased by 18 per cent. and the prison population by 12 per cent.

Mr. Alex Carlile (Montgomery): Is the Home Secretary able to tell us whether governor grades, prison officers or prisoners were injured during the events of last night and this morning? Does he agree that the creditable decision by the Prison Officers Association to return to work is a sufficient gesture for talks to be resumed without any further preconditions, and, if not, why not? Does he agree that it might be wise to approach the agenda for talks with a view to arranging a no-strike agreement between the Prison Officers Association and the Government? Will he take steps to review the prison building programme so that the building is carried out where it is most needed, because that is not happening at present?

Mr. Hurd: There were a number of minor injuries, but so far I know of no major injuries. It is something approaching a miracle that people were not badly hurt or worse during what happened last night.

I tried to explain why I used rather careful phrasing in outlining the nature of the talks that can now take place, and why it is not sensible to expose ourselves again to the sort of exchange we had on Monday about the relationship between talks and industrial action. I think it was on Tuesday that I answered a question by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Stanbrook) about the possibility of a no-strike agreement. It would have to be by agreement, but many hon. Members on both sides of the House would be attracted by that idea.

Mr. John Wheeler (Westminster, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that many people regard his handling of this dispute as positive and welcome the initiative for further dialogue with the POA? First, when he meets the representatives of the POA, will he remind them that the POA is a uniformed service of the Crown and its industrial behaviour imposes upon other services of the Crown, notably the police and perhaps the armed services, an obligation to pick up the POA's failings? Secondly, will he also remind them of the extent of investment in the prison service and especially about the prison building programme? After years of neglect by the Labour Government, that is an advantage not only to the prisoners but to the prison officers.

Mr. Hurd: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend's first point. He is a former prison governor and the point comes with particular force from him. I also agree with his second point. Five new prisons were opened in 1985-86 and 15 more are due to open by the early 1990s. Some 11,500 new prison places are being created. That is a substantial programme and it is in addition to refurbishment and the provision of sanitation. I do not agree with the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. Carlile) that the prisons are being built in the wrong places.

Mr. Martin Flannery (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Does the Minister remember that yesterday a Conservative Member talked about prison officers earning £15,000 a year? The number of prison officers has been increased but not sufficiently. Is it not to be condemned that officers are working as many as 20-30 hours a week overtime? That is because there are insufficient prison officers to do the job.

Will the right hon. Gentleman take note of what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Ms. Short) said about education? The Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts had on it some hon. Members from the Government side and it placed before the House a most important report setting out the cuts in education in the prison service. It showed that there were insufficient officers to escort the prisoners to classes. We had a debate on the matter but that got us nowhere, even though we warned about what would happen. When will the Government take note of that report and do something so that prison officers do not have to take action?

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Member spoke about prison officers' salaries. The average pay is £15,000, and that includes overtime. Overtime is not compulsory and quite a number of prison officers do not work overtime. However, a good many work 20 to 30 hours overtime a week. That is thoroughly bad but, to a large extent, it occurs because of the working practices and shift arrangements. That is one reason why it is crucial for us to discuss and change these arrangements.

Mr. Ian Gow (Eastbourne): Is it not the unpleasant truth that those who were properly sentenced to terms of imprisonment are now at liberty, and that substantial damage has been done to public property as a result of a breach of duty by the very people who have a special duty to protect the public interest?

Mr. Hurd: There must be widespread anxiety in the country and, indeed, within the ranks of the POA about the events of last night. They were appalling and must on no account be repeated.

Mr. James Lamond (Oldham, Central and Royton): Does the Home Secretary feel that he is assisted in any way in grappling with this great problem by hearing at Prime Minister's Question Time perfectly serious questions about the matter being greeted by jeers and boos and shrieks of laughter from the Government side, led by the Prime Minister herself?

Mr. Hurd: I am sorry to return to the matter, but I think it may have arisen because the Leader of the Opposition thought he was making a case in support of his arguments but was in fact, making a case against it.

Mr. Teddy Taylor (Southend, East): I fully support the action the Home Secretary has taken. Will he assure

[Mr. Teddy Taylor]

the House that contingency resources will be available speedily to restore order and security in the unfortunate event of a further outbreak of industrial unrest?

Mr. Hurd: I referred in my statement to arrangements involving the police and to arrangements between each governor and each prison and the chief officer of the local police forces. I also mentioned central arrangements involving the Government and particularly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): What proportion of the governor grades and the management of the prisons in the Home Office are former prison officers? How does the figure compare with promotion through the ranks of the police?

Mr. Hurd: Obviously, the structures are different, but I shall let the hon. Gentleman have the figures.

Mr. Derek Spencer (Leicester, South): Leicester gaol has a special secure unit. Can my right hon. Friend reassure those hon. Members who have similar units in their constituencies that their special requirements have an appropriate high priority?

Mr. Hurd: I certainly give my hon. and learned Friend that assurance. As he will know, there was some trouble in Leicester prison last night. The problem is not entirely resolved in that my last report was to the effect that POA officers at the gate were still discouraging staff who turned up for duty. I hope that that problem has been resolved by now.

Mr. Andrew Faulds (Warley, East): Would it not be advisable for the Prime Minister to abandon her jaunt to Tokyo in view of the fact that she is personally responsible for this trend in the breakdown of law and order which is a direct result of her Government's policies? If she does go, is it not a fact that nobody else in the Cabinet will be able to take any decision at all until she comes back?

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Member is in his usual wild and flaming form. He seems to have very little notion about how these affairs are conducted.

Mr. Michael Marshall (Arundel): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to assure those of us who have open prisons in our constituencies, such as I have at Ford, that the experience at Northeye has not been the general pattern? We accept that the prison officers and the governor did a good job in keeping things normal.

Mr. Hurd: Yes. That gives me an opportunity to say that not only at Ford but at the great majority of prison establishments there was no trouble last night.

Mr. Ian Lloyd (Havant): The country will have heard with immense relief the Home Secretary's statement this afternoon. Before too many diverse and disreputable organisations seek to parade their spurious claims against society under the banner of "industrial action", will my right hon. Friend make it perfectly clear that industry is not involved in this? We are not talking about action but inaction, and what we are seeing is civil disruption. Can he make sure that in future that phrase is used to describe this kind of action against society when organisations, however various, parade their grievances in the street?

Mr. Hurd: My hon. Friend is quite right. We lapsed into this jargon but it is not accurate and can be unhelpful.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Is the Home Secretary aware that Mr. Peter Clarke, the officially adopted Conservative candidate for my constituency who describes himself as a loyal Thatcherite, made a public statement last week describing the prison service as incompetent, inefficient, brutal and stupid. He went on to call for the privatisation of the penal system. Would the Home Secretary care to comment on those Tory policies?

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Member seems to have a particularly enterprising opponent, and I look forward to the intellectual debate that will follow.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): Is not my right hon. Friend currently undertaking a study into alternatives to prison and to the possibility of reducing prison population by that means? In his talks with the POA will he give priority to getting prisoners to education classes and make that part of the future duties of prison officers?

Mr. Hurd: One of the difficulties about the present situation is that prison officers are caught up with other activities. As my hon. Friend says, they might be better employed escorting people to and from education classes.

My hon. Friend asks about alternatives to custody. He knows that we cannot in any way direct the courts about who should go to prison, but where the courts can be persuaded that there are tough and practical alternatives to custody for minor offences, I hope that they will take them up.

Mr. John Ryman (Blyth Valley): May I ask the Home Secretary two specific questions? Does he agree that one of the fundamental problems is that basic pay is far too low in the prison service, so that to make a living wage a prison officer has to work overtime? That is why a vast amount of overtime is worked—the basic pay is insufficient to live on.

Secondly, what does the right hon. Gentleman propose to do about the extraordinary circular with which he has been inundating the judiciary, telling them what they already know—that their sentencing powers are very wide? I suggest that it amounts to an attempt to interfere with the judicial process.

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Gentleman's second point is nonsense. I answered questions about that before. The circular strictly followed precedent and was issued with the agreement of my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor. I think that the hon. Gentleman asked me two identical questions last night. The answer to the first is the same as last night—that there is scope for negotiations between the Treasury and the Prison Officers Association on basic pay. The irony is that those negotiations were about to begin when the present dispute escalated. I hope that if the procedural talks that I have outlined are successful, the substantial negotiations between the Treasury and the POA on basic pay can start.

Mr. Kenneth Warren (Hastings and Rye): Will my right hon. Friend take account of and give praise to the excellent work of the Sussex constabulary in containing the problems at Northeye? I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) will want to refer to that if he catches your eye, Mr. Speaker. Will my right hon. Friend praise the police for the way in which they contained a serious situation and for looking after prisoners in my constituency?

Mr. Hurd: I have heard praise from all quarters for the work of the Sussex constabulary. It received small quantities of help swiftly from Kent and Surrey. Two prisons are involved — Lewes and Northeye. The constabulary has performed a necessary job skilfully.

Mr. Greville Janner (Leicester, West): Does the Home Secretary accept that it is important to try to reach a settlement before the weekend, because at the weekend, in Leicester and elsewhere, prisons are manned to a large extent by people working overtime. If overtime is not to be worked, deputy governors and others who have been filling in from one prison to another will not be able to do so because they will have to look after the places where they are ordinarily stationed. Has the right hon. Gentleman contingency plans, and if so, what are they?

Mr. Hurd: The answer to the second question is yes, but I shall not tell the hon. and learned Gentleman what they are at this stage. The answer to his first question is that I hope that it is inconceivable that the action will be resumed between now and the weekend. That would be the height of irresponsibility.

Mr. Robert Atkins (South Ribble): Is my right hon. Friend aware that my constituents will be immensely grateful to the police from Leyland, who were called in to assist at Wymott prison, which is immediately adjacent to my constituency boundary? We are extremely grateful to them for what they have done. Is my right hon. Friend further aware that we on the Conservative Benches are getting a little sick of the sanctimonious claptrap from the Opposition Benches, bearing in mind the Labour Government's irresponsible management of the prison service over the years compared to ours? We have caught more criminals, imprisoned more prisoners and are building more prisons.

Mr. Hurd: It is true that we have grasped and are trying to deal with the problems, which are much worse than they need have been because they were shirked by the Labour Government.

Mr. Ken Eastham (Manchester, Blackley): During this fearful and disastrous period for the Home Office, may I remind the Home Secretary that in the major cities we have the oldest, most overcrowded and worst prisons? This is causing great anxiety in built-up city areas. Will the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that there will be no overspill of fear and disaster in communities in cities as a consequence of the disturbances?

Mr. Hurd: It is true that many of the Victorian prisons are in the heart of county towns and cities. It is an essential part of our programme to build new prisons, as in my own county, which will partly or wholly replace those prisons, or to refurbish them. They were extremely well built. If their design can be modernised, they still have a good deal of life in them, in many cases.

Mr. Geoffrey Dickens (Littleborough and Saddleworth): Has my right hon. Friend taken the opportunity, in his talks with the Prison Officers Association, to remind it that this Conservative Administration not only say that they care about the prison officers' future and their working conditions, but, unlike other parties, have announced the biggest building programme in the history of the prison service? We have

shown to the prison officers that we care about their future. I hope that in return they will help us in the fight to maintain law and order.

Mr. Hurd: I agree with the spirit of my hon. Friend's remarks. I hope that we can recover from this disastrous situation and, as my hon. Friend wishes, build up in the mind of the public once again the importance and necessity of the work that the prison officers do. We can all help in that.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have to take into account the subsequent business before the House. This afternoon I have given precedence to those who were not called last night. I shall now endeavour to call all those who have been standing provided that questions are brief.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Now that the Home Secretary is almost half way to getting his earhole belted by a group of trade unionists will the settlement be of the "Solomon Binding" variety, or will it be in the upper quartile? Whatever course is taken, is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the British people will not be hoodwinked by the Government? The Government were elected in 1979 on a law and order ticket and promised a short, sharp shock for prisoners and to set the British people free, yet seven years later here we are with the Tory Government delivering a short sharp shock, not to prisoners, but to the British people and setting the prisoners free.

Mr. Hurd: That was not too subtle, and I disagree.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Crawley): I welcome the news that further talks are to take place, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the prison officers who took part in the action yesterday showed a gross and inexcusable dereliction of duty?

Mr. Hurd: I think that prison officers will want to reflect carefully on the action that they took in response to the request of the national executive of the POA, and will want to think carefully about the consequences which, in a minority of cases, flowed from it.

Mr. Robert Kilroy-Silk (Knowsley, North): Does the Home Secretary accept that for a long time many of us have opposed some of the abuses of prison officers, which are so detrimental to taxpayers, prisoners and their families, but those abuses should have been dealt with by himself and his predecessors a long time ago? They can be fairly dealt with only by patient and long negotiations, not by the seemingly provocative, confrontationist politics on which the right hon. Gentleman is embarked. Will he give an assurance that in any further talks not only will there be no preconditions, but that part of the package for ending the dispute will include proposals to reduce substantially the prison population, thereby creating a constructive and positive regime for prison officers and prisoners?

Mr. Hurd: I am in favour of patient discussion of those matters as long as there is progress. The trouble is that over many years progress in that area has been extraordinarily slow. It is not our action that has been provocative in the past few weeks. The hon. Gentleman makes his point again about reducing the size of the prison population. He knows that I have no direction over the courts in that

[Mr. Hurd]

matter, so what one is talking about is persuading the courts that, in certain cases, as I have said, there are tough and practical alternatives.

Mr. Peter Bruinvels (Leicester, East): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the sit-in at Leicester prison during the night by 48 prisoners was peaceful only because of the able assistance given by five assistant governors? Will he join me in congratulating those assistant governors? Is he satisfied that there are enough assistant governors around to help? What will be done at the Old Bailey, which I understand had to be closed at 2 o'clock today because there were not enough prison officers to take the prisoners back to the remand centres?

Mr. Hurd: I shall keep an eye on the situation in Leicester to which my hon. Friend referred. I hope that the position in the law courts can revert to normal once the suspension of action takes effect.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is it not true that overcrowding in Britain's prisons is now so severe that more than half of Britain's prisoners are still slopping out, in 1986? Is it not true also that, even after the implementation of the Government's building programme, by 1991 there will still be 24,500 prisoners slopping out and, even after the completion of the programme by 1999, there will be 18,500 of Britain's prisoners slopping out? How is it possible to get peace in the prisons until conditions are improved?

Mr. Hurd: The hon. Gentleman should really be ashamed to make that point. What we are doing is retrieving a situation of scandalous neglect. It is not just a question of the new prisons, which obviously are built with new sanitation, but of the refurbishment of existing prisons which means that integral sanitation is being installed in 10,000 existing cells. That is quite a programme.

Mr. Tim Rathbone (Lewes): My right hon. Friend may be reassured to hear that I visited Lewes prison this morning and found that the governor and his assistant did a remarkable job last night. They are tired but in good heart today. The majority of the prisoners have behaved within all the rules of the prison. I believe that the majority of prison officers at Lewes prison would have wished to behave and to do their duty in their normal way. Unfortunately, there is a small coterie, both within the prisoners body and among the Prison Officers Association which stirs up this trouble. This was illustrated in a response to the governor himself by one prison officer, who, when greeted, said with a threatening smirk, "Ah, but the day is not over yet." I hope my right hon. Friend will ensure that communications between all members of the Prison Officers Association will be as good as his communications with the officers themselves.

Mr. Hurd: I am glad that my hon. Friend visited Lewes prison this morning. The situation at Lewes was one of the most difficult, and there are still difficulties, as he has just told us. I have taken careful note of what he said.

Mr. Harry Ewing (Falkirk, East): Is the Home Secretary aware that this problem will not be solved simply by negotiations or discussions between prison governors, assistant governors and the Association of

Chief Police Officers, because one of the major problems in the prisons throughout Great Britain is that a prison officer cannot in any circumstances become a governor or an assistant governor, and most of the governors and assistant governors are direct entrants from the college at Wakefield into the prison system, without any experience of managing difficult prisoners, let alone short-term prisoners? This matter will be solved only through negotiations between the Home Office and the Prison Officers Association. Generous as I am at times, I must say that of the four former Home Secretaries still in the House of Commons, three would have resigned on this issue, and the right hon. Gentleman really ought to follow the example of those three.

Mr. Hurd: I think that it was one of the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends who raised the question of the different structures of the two professions, the police and the prisons and, of course, they are different. I have been very impressed by the high quality and sensitivity of prison management, and I believe, from what I hear, that there has been a substantial improvement in that quality in recent years.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I have reported to my right hon. Friend what I saw at Northeye last night and again this morning after the prison was retaken. Will he recognise that a potentially very dangerous situation was contained largely because of the courageous action of the prison governor and chief officer, and because of the prompt and highly professional support of the Sussex police? Will he accept that the unavoidable impression from what I saw last night was that the riot would not have taken place if there had not been an overtime ban? Will he bear in mind that the total and wanton destruction of Northeye should be contrasted with the recent completion of five new prisons, with 15 more prisons to be completed in the next few years?

Mr. Hurd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for passing on the news of his visit to his constituency prison. The two Sussex prisons were among the most difficult. My hon. Friend was in close touch with me last night, and I am most grateful to him for his efforts.

Mr. Michael Stern (Bristol, North-West): Has my right hon. Friend heard the recent report from Bristol prison, with which I have been in touch all day, that that branch of the Prison Officers Association is still meeting to decide whether to obey the advice of its national executive and call off the overtime ban? If that report is correct—and I have no way of being certain about it—will my right hon. Friend join me and our hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of the Environment, who is also concerned with this issue, in calling upon the Bristol branch to take the advice of the national executive and contemplate the results of its inaction last night?

Mr. Hurd: I have not heard the report. Indeed, the report that I had from Bristol was rather to the contrary, that the local Prison Officers Association chairman, before the national executive decision, stated that staff would work normally there today, whatever the national executive decided. Obviously that needs looking into. If the situation is as my hon. Friend describes, I shall certainly agree with his appeal.

Mr. Kaufman: The Home Secretary, in response to his hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Mr. Soames), said

that the prison officers' action had been taken at the request of the national executive of the Prison Officers Association, whereas the position is precisely the opposite, namely, that the national executive of the Prison Officers Association took the action on the mandate of its membership, who, under the Government's own legislation took the Government's preferred course of a ballot, in which 78 per cent. voted. Of that figure 81 per cent. voted in favour of industrial action, which, as the Home Secretary has now acknowledged to me, under the ruling of the High Court it cannot be abandoned, as he demands, without a further ballot. That being so, following his statement and his responses today may be in danger of imposing requirements for talks which are too rigid and may lead to a breakdown. I therefore recommend

that the right hon. Gentleman studies the words that I put to him—they were not phrased idly and they were not put to him idly—since that kind of approach could be a means of achieving talks that might end the dispute.

Mr. Hurd: I shall certainly do what the right hon. Gentleman said at the beginning. I accepted when he first made the point that, because of the nature of its rules and the legal decisions that have flown from its rules, the Prison Officers Association has a procedural problem. There was nothing in the law of the land that forced the association to decide to instruct its members to follow the particular form of highly damaging and destructive action that it took. There was nothing that compelled it to do that. Therefore, I stand by what I said, but I will, of course, study all constructive suggestions that have been made.

Opposition Day

[13TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Caring for the Carers

Mr. Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.47 pm

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West): I beg to move,

That this House, noting that there are an estimated 5.5 million people from the age of seven to 70 years caring for disabled and elderly relatives at home, often for many years, pays the warmest possible tribute to those carers; and, further noting the research which shows that carers themselves suffer disproportionately from mental and physical illness, social isolation and poverty, calls upon the Government to take urgent action to improve their position, especially in view of the undoubted savings to public funds which flow from their commitment, and in particular to ensure that, in line with its stated policies on care in the community: (i) adequate respite care, both at home and in short-stay facilities, be assured by a considerable improvement in the level of support given to statutory and voluntary agencies, (ii) a flexible system of cash and other appropriate support services, such as home helps and home nursing, be available at times when the carer needs them and (iii) the invalid care allowance is made available to married women carers as recommended by the Select Committee.

Community care policies have been advocated now for a decade on the basis that it is much better for those who need support because of physical or mental infirmity to be cared for outside large institutions. It is now becoming increasingly recognised, however, that that policy has merely shifted the burden of care from the trained and supportive to the untrained and isolated in the form of the family. What started off as a policy of keeping dependent people out of institutions has backfired to the point where it has created more mentally and physically ill people—this time those who are supposed to be the carers.

At present, carers save the state over £5,000 million. That would be the cost to the state if it had to provide alternative institutional care. One would think that the state would aim to put back some of that money to support them in their invaluable role. Instead, the Government have been offloading responsibility on to their shoulders without even a sideways look at how they should be helping.

At present 5.5 million men and women are caring for an elderly or disabled friend or relative who could not live safely or comfortably without their help. They include about 1.25 million people who are caring for someone who is severely or extremely severely handicapped. I understand that as many as 100,000 of them have been caring for more than 10 years, and that thousands have been caring for as many as 30 years or more. Those figures give the lie to the myth that we are no longer a caring nation.

Today, far more people than ever before are making a major contribution to the physical and mental health of a family member, but they can maintain that role only if they have support. The Opposition have tabled this motion because of the absence of that support in far too many cases.

About two out of three carers are in poor physical or mental health at any one time. Recent surveys have shown

that nearly half are at serious risk of mental illness. Nearly seven in 10 suffer physical injury as a result of their caring duties, because there is a great deal of single-handed lifting involved, unlike in hospitals where nurses are ordered to lift only in pairs or using the appropriate hoists. The position is made worse for carers when a back injury cannot be rested or a hernia repaired because there is no one to take over their caring duties while they are in hospital.

Carers suffer emotional and psychological stress from social isolation, when other family members flatly refuse to help, or when statutory services simply fail to materialise in support. The complete submersion of one's own needs and preferences in those of another, and feeling wholly out of control of one's life are major causes of depression in carers. They suffer financial penalty because disability and frailty nearly always lead to reduced income and increased outgoings. The Government should not be so mealy-mouthed about that by altering the word "poverty", which we use, to "disadvantage" in their amendment. Carers suffer "poverty"—and we use that word advisedly.

Many entitlements to benefit are lost as soon as a disabled person moves in with a family member. An elderly disabled parent can no longer claim supplementary pension and will lose heating and diet allowances. Most important, carers' problems are often multiple, not of one type alone. Physical injuries, psychological stress, and financial hardship are often compounded. In addition, many carers have duties towards not only one single disabled, or extremely disabled, person, but to two, or even three. I could give many examples, but I shall cite one.

A woman of 50, whom I know, cares for her husband who is 20 years older than she is and is suffering from dementia. Her parents, who are in their 90s, and her mother's sister live with them. Both her mother and her mother's sister are physically frail, and her mother is also blind. She receives assistance only from a district nurse who comes once a week to give her mother a blanket bath. Such cases are typical. There is nothing exceptional about them.

All the evidence shows that the more handicapped and dependent a relative is, the less support a carer will receive from formal and informal agencies. That makes the cumulative burden all the harder to bear. The more disabled a relative, the fewer the people who are prepared to give the necessary assistance. It is because volunteers and neighbours are of little help when a disability becomes advanced, which is when help is needed, that statutory support is urgently required.

Above all, the debate centres on the unrecognised needs of women. More than one in eight women is a carer, an four out of five carers are women. Their position is much worse than that of their male counterparts because they are much more likely to have to give up their jobs. They have less money, experience more stress, and are less likely to receive support services. To add insult to injury, married and cohabiting women are denied invalid care allowance, which is the sole benefit paid to people who are prevented from undertaking full-time work because they are carers.

The problem will not go away. As the numbers of elderly people increase—that section of the population will grow fastest towards the end of the century—an increasing number of people will need assistance if they are to continue to lead independent, fulfilled lives. Our