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PRIME MINISTER

Review of Contingency Planning
(E(79) 48)

BACKGROUND

This paper does not seek any major decisions. Its main purpose is to inform the Committee, although a number of decisions on points of detail are needed to allow planning to proceed. The main issues are summarised in the Home Secretary's cover note, and you need not read all the other material unless you wish to do so. But there are some specific areas - to which I shall draw attention later - which are worth a closer look.

2. The paper does two things; it reports on the annual review of the contingency plans in the light of past experience, and on this occasion takes account of the differences in planning that flow from the change in Government. It also reports in paragraph 16 of the officials' paper on the particular state of fuel supplies and the coal industry, in response to a remit from E Committee at the meeting on 27th September (E(79) 9th Meeting).

3. In addition to the points in the paper Mr. Whitelaw may also raise the state of planning against disruption in the Prisons against the possibility of prison staff withdrawing their labour because they are not satisfied when the May Committee inquiry report is published on 31st October. So far the Home Office have assumed the use of police in a support role. The Northern Ireland and Scottish Offices propose the use of servicemen - although this is likely to be strongly opposed by the Secretary of State for Defence. It now seems that the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) are opposing the England and Wales plan, and their President will be seeing Mr. Whitelaw on Monday. Mr. Whitelaw will presumably only be able to report on the current position - and in any case other members of the Committee will not be prepared for a substantive discussion. If the matter is raised you need do no more than invite Mr. Whitelaw in consultation with Ministers concerned to report to you with a co-ordinated plan as soon as possible.

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HANDLING

4. I suggest that you should ask the Home Secretary to introduce the paper briefly, and then use the sub-paragraphs in paragraph 2 of his cover paper as pegs on which to hang discussion.

Paragraph 2a. Review of Plans


5. The Committee should note the limitations as well as the range of contingency planning. In virtually all cases the co-operation of supervisory staff is needed. In some cases the co-operation of other groups is needed e.g. Post Office staff can - if they co-operate - be used to reduce the effects of certain forms of civil service action. Given these requirements the plans can often delay the worst effects of the action for several weeks. But if, for example, power engineers or water industry supervisors, did not co-operate, conditions would be intolerable within hours or days. Many plans involve the use of servicemen. There is always some risk - particularly if they use civilian equipment such as ambulances or fire-engines - that using them may intensify the industrial action: but this largely depends on the public mood at the time.

Paragraph 2b. Semi-political Disruption

6. The Home Secretary has gone into the question of "political" strikes this winter with some care. His conclusion is that the existing contingency plans will serve for these as for other strikes.

Paragraph 2c. The Coal Industry

7. You may wish to look at this in rather more depth in view of the current miners' pay claim. If the miners strike, they are likely also to place an effective block on coal movements. Thus the endurance period depends on power station coal stocks. The graph at Annex B shows that they are low compared to recent years - but not far below the 10 ^{year} ~~per cent~~ average. Oil stocks at power stations are relatively high but even so are only "worth" - in energy terms - about 15-20 per cent of coal stocks - so that their effect on the "endurance period" is fairly marginal. Thus the paper concludes that after about 4 weeks electricity supply would begin to be disrupted - and would continue


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on a reducing scale for a few weeks more. In practice of course reductions in consumption would be needed at a much earlier stage in order to spin-out the endurance period.

8. Emergency Powers, under the Energy Act, made by an Order in Council without a "State of Emergency" declaration, could help to control use of coal and other energy. There is no effective means available to increase power station coal stocks once a major dispute has started. Endurance can only be increased by restricting electricity usage.

Paragraph 2d. Use of Volunteers

9. Paragraph 15 (iii) of the officials' paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using volunteers. Mr. Whitelaw suggests that for the moment they should be considered in the NHS only, and the position kept under review.

Paragraph 2e. Consultations

10. Effective planning requires a degree of pre-consultation outside Government service. If this became known the unions will probably claim provocation. The Home Secretary nevertheless recommends that the Government should, in prudence, enter into consultations where necessary and defend its action if this became public knowledge.


Paragraph 2f. Publicity

11. On past experience it is sometimes difficult for Government to get its case across effectively. The union's statements usually make the best newspaper stories. Mr. Whitelaw suggests more effort on this - with plans for a Central Press Unit to co-ordinate briefings in a time of widespread industrial action - rather than leaving it to Departmental and regional Press offices.

CONCLUSIONS

12. The specific decisions which Mr. Whitelaw requests are listed in paragraph 3 of his paper (and in more detail in paragraphs 26-33 of the official paper). Subject to unexpected points arising in discussion there would seem to be no reason for the Committee to dissent from any of these recommendations. In addition, if the prisons point referred to above is raised you may wish simply to take note and invite Mr. Whitelaw in consultation with the other Ministers concerned to report to you with a co-ordinated plan as soon as possible.

12th October 1979


(John Hunt)

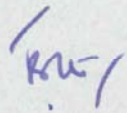
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The Paymaster General is sick and will not be at the meeting of E on Tuesday. Paragraph 2 f. of this paper, on publicity, suggests a new remit to the Paymaster General. He has seen the paper, and we understand that he is content to accept this remit if the Committee so wishes. You may wish to tell the Committee this when it reaches this item.


(John Hunt)

15th October 1979