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Ref. A0823

PRIME MINISTER

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Contingency Planning: Use of Volunteers and Central  
Press Unit

(E(79) 71 and E(79) 62)

BACKGROUND

Both these papers were commissioned at the meeting of E Committee on 16th October (E(79) 11th Meeting).

2. On volunteers colleagues felt at the last discussion that there was much more scope for using volunteers in industrial action than the previous Government had been prepared to contemplate. Mr. Whitelaw's paper describes the conclusions of a review by the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) in which officials were asked to cast the net widely, and to take soundings of their own Ministers before reporting to the Unit. The basic conclusion is that volunteers might have a role in a number of specific areas (paragraph 2 of the paper) and that in order to find out how big a role, consultations with the employers in these fields are needed. There seems little scope for using the "uniformed" volunteer services, although it is conceivable that members of the Territorial Army might be willing to volunteer for additional duties in support of the Regular Army when engaged in tasks supporting the civil Ministries. The arrangements for mobilising volunteer effort cannot be decided until the consultations with employers have been undertaken.

3. The report points out that there are disadvantages, as well as advantages, in using volunteers. For example it could put at risk the co-operation of supervisory staff, and so compromise the maintenance of the whole service they are trying to help.

4. On the Central Press Unit (CPU) Mr. Maude was asked to prepare a contingency plan for establishing a CPU to improve the Government's handling of publicity in relation to industrial disputes. This is a wider remit than the Civil Contingencies field itself, which is concerned only with threats to essential services. Government publicity in industrial disputes might be needed in advance of the dispute actually commencing, to ensure that facts at issue are



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brought out, and there might also be a role in presenting the Government's case as employer in a Civil Service dispute. Mr. Maude proposes a Unit with a co-ordinating function, with executive responsibility left entirely with Departments concerned. The Unit would be chaired by himself, and would comprise Information Officers from all relevant Departments, and No. 10. It could be activated either by a request from yourself, or from the Chairman of the Civil Contingencies Unit, or the Committee on Industrial Relations in the Civil Service, Mr. Whitelaw or Lord Soames respectively.

#### HANDLING

5. Although both relate to contingency planning, you may find it convenient to take discussion on the two papers separately.

#### VOLUNTEERS

6. On Volunteers you might ask Mr. Whitelaw to introduce his paper (E(79) 71) and then seek general comments on the points the paper raises.

7. You might clarify first whether colleagues agree that the areas identified in paragraph 2 are the right ones. Although paragraph 3 says that work is continuing on the scope for volunteers in five other areas, there is no real prospect in those areas.

8. Then you might ask whether colleagues agree to consultations (paragraphs 4 and 5). There is the publicity angle to be considered, and the proposal is to start with local authority and public sector employers only. The Committee has agreed previously that consultations could take place with Health Authorities about the use of volunteers in the NHS.

9. You might then turn to the specific issues identified in paragraph 7 of Mr. Whitelaw's paper.

#### (a) Use of the Territorial Army

Mr. Pym will have views, and perhaps the Attorney General. But this seems the best hope of using a disciplined force, in their units. They would be in a supporting role to the army, and so would add to resources in tackling the strike only to the extent that the army was already overstretched by the demands upon them.



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(b) Special Constables

Should Chief Constables be encouraged to use Specials more, - and to be given more help in recruiting them - to release police for sensitive tasks in handling industrial disruption? This question has wider implications: there are good grounds for developing the role of the Special Constabulary as a voluntary service quite apart from their value in emergencies; but the Police Federation would be very resistant.

(c) The Royal Observer Corps and Auxiliary Coastguards.

Agree not worth pursuing?

(d) Volunteer Centre Guidelines.

Devised in consultation with the unions and having wide backing from the voluntary organisations. Using volunteers on this basis should ensure that there would be no objection from potential critics. But to accept it in advance for all cases would involve the Government in giving up too much flexibility.

(e) Premises for mobilising volunteers.

Decisions to await results of consultation?

(f) Role of a Central Press Unit.

To be discussed as a separate item.

(g) Civil Defence Organisation.

The organisation no longer exists, and when it did its justification was primarily a war defence. Is it worth a further look to see whether it could possibly be justified allowing for civil emergency as well as war time use, or is the cost out of scale with any possible benefit?

CONCLUSION ON VOLUNTEERS

10. The decisions that you have reached on each of the items discussed above will form the conclusions.

CENTRAL PRESS UNIT

11. You might ask Mr. Maude to introduce his paper (E(79) 62). You might deal first with the general principle of a unit, and then separately with the question of finance for any publicity which they recommend.



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12. It is envisaged that the proposed unit should do two jobs:

- (1) To ensure that the substance of a dispute - with its likely consequences - ~~is~~ ~~was~~ presented as effectively as possible to the media and the public.
- (2) Once the dispute reached the stage of an emergency, to publicise and explain the Government's plans for safeguarding essential services.

Do colleagues agree that it is right to have the same unit for both jobs? They are rather different, and are likely to involve different people and different tasks. The first will require preparation of detailed material relating to the substance and handling of a claim, monitoring of media reporting of the claim and its handling, so far as they affect the Government, and action to prompt speedy and effective reaction or response (in so far as Government reaction or response is appropriate) to published stories or interviews as they occur. The second will be a much more straightforward job of co-ordinating and disseminating information. It is arguable that the Unit proposed in paragraph 3(ii) of the Paymaster General's paper is right for the second but not for the first, and that the first needs something different: a small number of people, not necessarily all Information Officers, who should include somebody from the Department of Employment and somebody from the "sponsoring" department of the industry affected, who need not necessarily be engaged solely on this work but who can be activated when the need arises and may for the period of a dispute need to give all their time to it, and who should be supervised by a Minister - either the Paymaster General or a Minister in one of the departments represented on the group. It is not clear that there is a role in this for collective meetings of a number of Information Officers. And there would be something to be said for not compromising the effectiveness and acceptability of the machinery which handles press relations aspects of emergency situations by putting on to it the different task of advising on the role of Government public relations in the course of an industrial dispute.

13. There is a separate issue of how publicity should be financed.

Mr. Biffen will wish to speak. But the sums involved will be fairly small, and will be urgently needed at the time. So although the Unit cannot have carte blanche they need some workable arrangement with the Treasury.



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CONCLUSION ON CENTRAL PRESS UNIT

14. Subject to the discussion, the Committee may agree that a Central Press Unit should be established, to be activated as suggested in the paper, or as otherwise agreed in discussion; and that Mr. Biffen and Mr. Maude should agree suitable arrangements for controlling (and permitting) Departmental expenditure on advertising which result from the work of the Unit.

RA

(Robert Armstrong)

3rd December, 1979



Govt Machinery

10 DOWNING STREET

Prin invite

Mr. Pym, Ltd Mansfield,

Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Foster,

and Mr. Mansfield have

been invited to win

it.

R.

4-12-29

cc Nat Ind Line 79 - Coal.

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD  
WHITEHALL PLACE, LONDON SW1A 2HH



From the Minister

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The Prime Minister

As you know I shall be involved in discussions in the Community on Tuesday and shall not be able to attend the meeting of the Economic Strategy Committee.

I am in favour of a Central Press Unit for use in emergencies - E(79)62. Food and agricultural supplies would be affected in many emergencies and - although I accept that there is no occasion for my Department to be included in the regular membership of the Unit - I should want us brought in when food and agricultural problems were likely to be in question.

In case the discussion on miners' pay should turn to contingency planning for the consequences of industrial action in the mines and the spin-off into electricity supply, I should like to register that food production and distribution would be greatly affected by cuts in electricity supply. It is important to maintain full production as long as possible, otherwise our capacity to hold out should the situation deteriorate would be badly affected. I should hope therefore that contingency plans will wherever possible provide priorities and that food will have first priority.

I am sending copies of this letter to members of E Committee, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Paymaster General, the Minister of Transport and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Peter Walker  
30 November 1979