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PRIME MINISTER


Local Government Bill: London

Meeting with Environment Ministers and Business Managers:
26 March 1985

(Minute from the Secretary of State for the Environment to
the Prime Minister dated 19 March 1985)

BACKGROUND

1. Ever since the announcement of the Government's plan to abolish the Greater London Council (GLC), pressure has been sustained for some form of replacement body. This pressure is unique to London; the abolition of the Metropolitan Counties does not appear to engender the same feelings. There are two strands to the argument. The first is that London would be the only major city in the United Kingdom without its own representative voice; the City of London as such is not regarded as fulfilling this function. The other strand is the doubts that are felt that the London boroughs would co-operate to provide certain London-wide services as is envisaged in the Government's proposals. A case is therefore advanced by some for a functional body, either elected or appointed, which, once in being, could also undertake the representational functions. The view of Ministers is that such a body would effectively give the GLC "life after death" and render much of the abolition exercise pointless, that it is in any case unnecessary, and would be virtually impossible to set up satisfactory arrangements.
2. An amendment to provide for a directly elected authority representing the area presently administered by the GLC, with powers to be determined after an enquiry by a Select Committee, was proposed at the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill and relatively narrowly defeated by 23 votes. A similar amendment has now been



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tabled at Report Stage by Geoffrey Rippon, MP, Patrick Ground MP and others. It too provides for a directly elected body formed out of the residuary body already provided for in the Bill, with further powers "not being functions which are transferred by the Act solely to individual London boroughs" to be determined by Parliament on the recommendation of a Select Committee.

3. In parallel with these moves, Sir Philip Goodhart MP has been pursuing and refining his idea for a London Grand Committee. He sees this as providing a Parliamentary forum for the discussion of London affairs. The Committee would consist of all London Members of Parliament and, in response to criticism that this would be large and unwieldy, he now proposes to add to it a Select Committee for London. The Select Committee would monitor and report upon the activities of the Ministerial responsibilities, direct and indirect, for London. It would not cover issues which were the responsibility of the Greater London Boroughs. The Grand Committee would then discuss the reports of the Select Committee and the Ministerial responses to them. Inevitably, the field of activity of the Select Committee would clash with those of other Select Committees. Sir Philip Goodhart sees at least half the time in the first year or so being spent on London Transport and matters such as education and policing would also become the subject of the Select Committee's activities.

MAIN ISSUES

4. The main issues for discussion are:

a. Will the Local Government Bill secure sufficient Parliamentary approval at Report and Third Reading to enable relevant amendments in the House of Lords to be firmly resisted? In particular will the majority rejecting the Rippon amendment be much more substantial than that rejecting the similar amendment at Committee Stage?



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b. If a substantial rejection of ideas for a new London body does not seem likely, could it be achieved with some concession on the Government's part?

c. If a concession is judged to be necessary, would sufficient views be swayed by a promise to consider the Parliamentary proposal made by Sir Philip Goodhart? (The setting up of a Select and Grand Committee would normally be done by an amendment to the Standing Orders of the House, rather than by statute).

d. If the 'Parliamentary solution' is not judged satisfactory or sufficient, what would be the minimum concession which the Government could make which would be likely to have a significant effect? (Councillor Greengross has suggested that an appointed body could "co-ordinate the finances of the boroughs and ensure that the services devolved to the boroughs were delivered".)

HANDLING

5. You may wish to suggest that the Secretary of State for the Environment should begin by outlining the present situation which the Government faces at Report Stage. You will then wish to ask the Chief Whip for his assessment of the likely outcome of voting on the Rippon amendment and the Lord President for his views about the situation in the House of Lords. The Minister for Local Government will have his own views about how far a concession is necessary and which will be the best form of concession.

CONCLUSION

6. The Report Stage of the Bill begins on Wednesday. You will therefore wish the meeting to reach firm conclusions on the nature, if any, of a concession to be made at Report in order to secure the Government's main objectives.