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PM's NOV 1987

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CENTRAL OFFICE OF INFORMATION

cc. (without attachments)

PS/Chancellor

PS/Chief Secretary

Mr Anson
Mr Felgett
Mrs Wiseman

From the Director General

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9/11/87

PS/Paymaster General
HM Treasury

COMMUNITY CHARGE PUBLICITY: OPPOSITION CRITICISM

As the PMG is aware, Mr Jeff Rooker has written to the Prime Minister complaining that COI has misused public funds in producing, on behalf of DOE, a booklet on the Community Charge before legislation has been agreed by Parliament.

A draft reply to Mr Rooker has yet to be agreed between the Prime Minister's Press Secretary and myself, but we are in discussion with DOE both about the general reply to be given to Mr Rooker as well as the preparation of possible supplementary answers, given that Mr Rooker will have an early opportunity to question the Prime Minister tomorrow.

The General Background

The reaction of the Opposition to publicity ahead of legislation is an inevitable sensitivity at all times, but it is obviously particularly so when it concerns the DOE because of the background of the Widdicombe Enquiry and the proposed legislation curbing publicity activities of Local Authorities.

When COI was asked to prepare both a leaflet and video as part of a wide-ranging campaign to explain the proposals for the Community Charge, we did in fact point out to DOE that there were dangers and suggested that it would be safer to seek the Lord President's view, given the context. My Deputy pointed out to DOE that we had misgivings about some of the text proposed and generally advised against a "popular" approach. We understand that similar advice was given to DOE Ministers by their own officials but it was nevertheless decided by Ministers that a leaflet and a video should be prepared by COI. There was subsequent discussion on a number of detailed points with strong advice from COI to delete from the leaflet and the video material

which Ministers had earlier wished included. Our advice was taken subsequently, areas of potential controversy were deleted and additional qualifications were built-in to the soundtrack of the video to ensure that references to the Community Charge related to "proposals" and "... subject to legislation ..." etc.

Because of the number of times we have found that we have to spell out the reason for sensitivity over publicity matters, and particularly because of the very difficult discussions we had with DOE, I decided I would recirculate material on conventions and this I did on 30th July, copying to all Heads of Information. I attach this material as general background for the PMG.

One of the problems about COI's exercising a propriety role against the standard conventions is that we only have a role where departments use COI for publicity spending. I am not using this as an argument against untying; however, it has to be recognised that both as a result of FMI and the freedom of departments to spend their money directly with contractors, the central propriety role of COI is inevitably diminished, though I do not propose going into anywhere near this amount of detail in the background note to the Prime Minister.

Specific Responses

As the material was subsequently amended and produced, I do not believe that the Community Charge leaflet or the video breach the Widdicombe conventions. Any note to the Prime Minister will make that perfectly clear.

We are on slightly difficult ground in having to answer Mr Rooker's charge that nevertheless we have moved the goal-posts as it were. While Mr Rooker is incorrect in saying that the Widdicombe guidelines make it clear that COI publications should only be issued after publication of a Bill or White Paper,

it is a bit unfortunate that my Deputy has been correctly quoted as saying to the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee "... and in the case of legislation, funds are not deployed until after the Royal Assent."

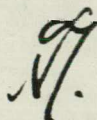
What Miss Jefferies should have said, of course, is that publicity material usually follows from legislation. Almost certainly Miss Jefferies intended also to make clear that the conventions ruled out any "paid advertising campaigns" which might, for example, tell the public of new entitlements or benefits which prospective legislation may give them. However, the records of the Committee hearing quote Miss Jefferies as only making a general comment about Royal Assent and publicity and I am afraid, therefore, that we are "stuck" with her words and will have to qualify them as best we can.

Other Possible Dangers

No doubt the PMG will have noted that a large number of PQs have been tabled by Mr Jerry Hayes on the size and cost of Information Divisions in all departments (and asking for costs for COI as well). This, plus the Jeff Rooker allegations, will inevitably mean a more intense spotlight on Government publicity spending and, in this context, the recent Winter Supplementary for COI will no doubt draw fire as well. Lastly, it seems sensible that I endeavour to keep the PMG more closely informed about publicity issues. I have endeavoured not to over-burden the Minister with notes about my rather more restricted custodianship of COI. It is inevitable that someone will want to make mischief out of the fact that the Minister is responsible both for the Chairmanship of the Party and the COI, thereby raising more suspicion than usual that COI is being misused for Party political propaganda.

I am sorry that this has inevitably meant a rather long background note to the Minister. I felt it necessary on this

occasion to provide more background than will be included in the note which I shall be putting forward for Mr Ingham and the Prime Minister, once we have reached agreement on various forms of words with the DOE.



Neville Taylor
9th November 1987