



PRIME MINISTER

At the beginning of the Environment Council on 24 November Malcolm Caithness drew colleagues' attention to the announcement the previous day of our March 1989 "Saving the Ozone Layer" Conference and our offer to host UNEP's second meeting of the Montreal Protocol Parties in April 1990. He added that Dr Tolba, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, had enthusiastically accepted this offer.

It was as well that he spoke early as the Belgian Environment Minister, Mrs Smet, came in immediately with an angry protest claiming that Belgium had also offered to host the 1990 meeting and she insisted on UK withdrawal. Malcolm expressed surprise that Dr Tolba had not mentioned the Belgian offer and it emerged during the day that he had probably not received it as it has been sent via leisurely diplomatic channels.

After an assurance to Mrs Smet that we had no idea they had an interest in April 1990 it was left to officials during the day to try to sort matters out. It soon became clear that the Belgians did not understand that UNEP was in charge of the Montreal Protocol process; that they thought the April 1990 meeting was in the EC Commission's gift; and they had had no idea of Dr Tolba's volatility. They were firmly told that if the UK withdrew this would greatly offend Tolba and he would almost certainly approach the United States to offer a venue, as he apparently had in mind before we met him.

The Belgians apparently accept that we acted in good faith but are still smarting at having been pre-empted. It seems they foolishly announced to their Parliament their intention of hosting the review meeting before approaching UNEP. We have told them we are unhappy about their embarrassment, but without in the least suggesting withdrawal. I see no reason to do more, but Mrs Smet thought it possible that Mr Martens would ring you or talk to you

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at the Rhodes Council, although he may now have second thoughts in view of the Ryan affair.

For my part I see no reason to apologise or withdraw on account of Belgian incompetence. In any event we understand that Belgium will be hosting a Council of Europe Environment Ministers meeting in 1990 which should be some consolation.

I am copying this to Geoffrey Howe.

NR

29 November 1988