

CABINET

MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC STRATEGY

CIVIL CONTINGENCIES: PUBLICITY ARRANGEMENTS

Note by the Lord President of the Council

With the agreement of the Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) at Ministerial level officials have been reviewing arrangements for handling publicity during a major industrial dispute or other civil emergency. They have now put forward proposals for a simplified system, which is described in the annexed note by the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary. These would replace those set out by the then Paymaster General in E(79) 62.

2. The essence of the new proposals is that prime responsibility for effective communication with the media should rest with the lead Department(s) in each case; and that the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary should be responsible for co-ordinating Departments' efforts and reporting to the Lord President and to the CCU at Ministerial and official levels. No Central Press Unit would be required.

3. These arrangements were tried out during the ambulance dispute earlier this year and seemed to work well. I therefore recommend that we formally approve them. Unless contrary views are put forward by any member of the Committee before Christmas I shall assume that this is agreed.

Privy Council Office

11 December 1981

CIVIL CONTINGENCIES UNIT: PUBLICITY

Note by the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary

This paper sets out the case for a simplified approach to the handling of publicity during a major industrial dispute or other emergency in parallel with the work of the Civil Contingencies Unit.

2. Existing arrangements stem from a paper (E(79) 62) of 29 November 1979 by the then Paymaster General. This envisaged

- a Central Press Unit composed of the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary; Home Controller, COI; and the Heads of Information of the Home Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office, Treasury, Departments of Employment and Industry, plus of any other Department with an interest; this would meet under the chairmanship of the Paymaster General from the outset of a potentially dangerous industrial dispute or other emergency;

- activation by the Paymaster General at the request of the Prime Minister, Home Secretary or Lord President.

3. These arrangements were approved by E(79) 11th Meeting of 5 December 1979. The minutes record, however, that the responsibility for press relations would rest with the lead Department in each dispute. Suitable co-ordination was to be arranged through the proposed Central Press Unit.

4. The arrangements approved included (in paragraph 5(ii) of E(79) 62) an operations room to be set up in the Press Office of the lead Department in the dispute, capable of being manned 24 hours a day by the lead Department, supplemented as necessary by representatives of other major Departments involved

Changes Required

5. Experience suggests that these arrangements are unnecessarily elaborate.

6. Presentation during an industrial dispute has two objectives:

i. to inform (and reassure) the public about the contingency arrangements; and

ii. to sway public opinion so that support for those taking the action dwindles.

Only the lead Department is in a position to undertake the first; but the second does require careful co-ordination with other interested Departments and with the Prime Minister's office.

7. Therefore, first we should dispense with the concept of a press operations room in the lead Department. There is undoubtedly a need in particular types of emergency - eg a 1973-74 miners' dispute - for an extensive operations room to cope with queries from the public, industry, trade etc which, among other things, are subject to legal restrictions. But there is no need for a similar room for press, radio and TV relations. There are two levels of media operation

- co-ordination, whether under the chairmanship of the Lord President or the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary; and
- the Press Office of the lead Department or Departments.

It should be the responsibility of the Departments concerned to liaise with each other, No 10 and the CCU as required; we should do nothing to dilute the specific and essential responsibility of individual Departments from presenting their aspect of the emergency, though it may be necessary at times to find ways of reinforcing particular Press Offices which are under exceptional strain.

8. The existing arrangements, as they stand, could damage Government presentation because they tend to detract from the responsibility of individual Departments for presenting their case effectively and ensuring that the rest of the Government machine knows and broadly approves of what they are doing.

The Future

9. Future arrangements have to take account of prevailing circumstances and practicality. It is proposed that:

- responsibility for effectively presenting the Government's case in disputes or other emergencies should rest - and be seen to rest - with the lead Department or Departments directly involved;
- the lead Department(s) should have direct responsibility for liaising with the Lord President and the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary and ensuring that other affected Departments are kept informed as required;
- to facilitate that liaison the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary should, in consultation with the lead Department(s) and the Lord President, convene meetings as required to ensure proper co-ordination;

- the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary should be responsible for reporting to the Lord President, and to the CCU at both Ministerial and official levels, on the action recommended and taken.

December 1981