

LEADER'S CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the 186th Meeting held at 5.00 pm on Wednesday, 18th January 1978, in the Leader's Room at the House of Commons.

Present: Mrs. Thatcher (in the Chair)

Mr. Whitelaw, Sir Keith Joseph, Lord Carrington, Lord Thorneycroft, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Mr. Prior, Mr. Pym, Sir Ian Gilmour, Mr. Peyton, Mr. Davies, Mr. Neave, Mr. Heseltine, Mr. St. John Stevas, Mr. Maude, Mr. Edwards, Mr. Nott, Mrs. Oppenheim, Mr. King, Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Atkins.

In attendance: Sir Michael Havers, Mr. Butler, Mr. Stanley, Mr. Patten, Mr. Hooson, Miss Bulloch.

Apologies: Lord Hailsham, Mr. Jenkin.

1. Proposed Business for the Week 23rd-30th January

On Monday, 23rd January, there would be a Supply Day. This would be followed by a debate on Agriculture, on a Motion when EEC Documents R/2601/77 and R/2651/77 would be relevant (Mr. Peyton, Mr. Jopling). Afterwards there would be a Motion to take note of Developments in the EEC Civil Aircraft Sector when Commission Documents R/2461/75, R/1869/76, R/222/77 and R/1964/77 would be relevant.

On Tuesday, 24th January, Mr. S. Ross would seek leave to introduce his Hairdressers (Registration) (Amendment) Bill under the 10 Minute Rule. This would be followed by the 11th day of the Committee Stage of the Scotland Bill (Mr. Pym and team).

On Wednesday, 25th January, Mr. H. Miller would seek leave to introduce his Education Act 1944 (Amendment) Bill under the 10 Minute Rule. This would be followed by the 12th day of the Committee Stage of the Scotland Bill (Mr. Pym and team).

On Thursday, 26th January, there would be the Committee Stage of the European Assembly Elections Bill (Mr. Whitelaw and team).

On Friday, 27th January, there would be the Second Reading of Mr. Mikardo's Employment Protection (Amendment) Bill (Mr. Prior) and the Bills of Mr. Trotter, Mr. G. Page and Mr. Pavitt.

On Monday, 30th January, there would be a Supply Day.

2. Matters Arising on Business

There was a discussion and the following was noted:

(i) The position in the Business Committee over the Committee Stage of the Scotland Bill was at present rather confused. It was possible that objections might be raised when the decision on the use of the Chairman's vote on the allocation of time was known. The Bill would probably leave the Commons on 14th or 21st February: the timing would become clearer the following week. It was in our interests that the Bill should run on into August. It seemed unlikely that the Government would hold up the Scottish referendum until the Welsh Bill had received the Royal Assent, although they would obviously prefer to hold both referenda together. There was a possibility that the Scottish referendum could be in July.

(ii) Dr. Owen had given an undertaking in Brussels that the European Assembly Elections Bill would be passed during this Session. The question of whipping on Northern Ireland amendments was discussed. There was some support for applying the single transferable vote system in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it was argued that the paramount need was to emphasise the unity of the United Kingdom, particularly after Mr. Lynch's recent demand for a commitment to withdraw from Northern Ireland. It was agreed that we should continue to have a strong one-line whip on the Bill.

(iii) Mr. Mikardo's Employment Protection (Amendment) Bill had not yet been published but was known to be objectionable and it was agreed that we would vote against it in force. It was understood that all Labour members had been asked to attend on Friday, 20th and 27th January for both Employment Protection Bills.

2. Subjects for the Supply Days

It was agreed that on the Supply Day on Monday, 23rd January, we would debate a Motion to devalue the Green Pound by 7½ per cent with a three line whip. The Liberals, Scottish Nationalists and Ulster Unionists were likely to support us, and it was possible that the Government could be defeated. If, to avoid defeat, Mr. Silkin agreed to a 7½ per cent devaluation instead of the 5 per cent he was expected to announce, we could still debate the Government's mishandling of the issue.

A number of subjects were suggested for the Supply Day on Monday, 30th January. These included Soviet involvement in Africa; illegal immigrants; fisheries, on which it was noted that Mr. Silkin was likely to return from Brussels without any success to report; GATT and the Tokyo Round; pay sanctions applied to companies, together with Price Commission activities in general; North Sea oil; unemployment; and inflation. There should certainly be a debate on steel, but the time was not quite ripe. There was expected to be a second report from the Select Committee shortly. It was agreed that we should seek to pin as much responsibility for the present situation as possible on Mr. Varley. The Government, in taking action, were under the handicap of having many Labour seats at risk. We should make use of the "pork barrel" argument. Other Select Committees were likely before long to complain of having been misled by the information (or lack of it) provided to them by Government Departments.

3. Tactics in the House

Mr. Pym opened the discussion. Constitutional Bills were at present occupying so much time in the House that our scope for attacking the Government and putting forward our own policies was limited. Some successes had been achieved from the backbenches, notably Mr. Ridley's Private Members Bill on picketing that afternoon. It was agreed that we should:

(i) make maximum use of Supply Days, both for attack and presentation of our proposals;

(ii) take care to follow up Government or Labour Party statements e.g. Mr. Varley's claim that foreign steel industries had greater losses than BSC;

(iii) make greater use of Question Time, attendance at which had been falling off;

(iv) make more use of 10 Minute Rule Bills;

(v) ask backbench Committee Chairmen to initiate Supply Day debates and 10 Minute Rule Bills.

(vi) make a concerted attack on certain key issues, such as nationalisation, without feeling inhibited from speaking on subjects that were primarily the responsibility of colleagues.

4. Other Business

Mrs. Thatcher said that she would shortly be writing to colleagues to ask them to submit proposals for the Manifesto and for General Election press conference presentation of themes.

The meeting closed at 6.10 p.m.