



Prime Minister. 3

I shall be delighted to have 45 mins with J.N. & P.C. on the Trident decision on a paper to be read out at the

MO 18/1/1

A very interesting meeting.

I suggest that we use the meeting

which Mr. North asks us to discuss not only the overall balance of the defence programme but also the Trident issue. Do

PRIME MINISTER

Trident presentation, not only the overall balance of the defence programme but also the Trident issue. Do you agree?

If you do, we shall need 45 minutes, I suggest.

TRIDENT: PUBLIC ATTITUDES

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I am hoping that I may have 45 minutes of your time, in the presence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, before your departure to Washington, so that I can give you my first, tentative, assessment of our longer term commitments and of where we may need to make changes to bring them back into relationship with our likely longer term resources.

2. Having put to bed, albeit temporarily, the controversy about defence expenditure in 81/82, I wanted, in the meantime, to tell you of the wider and more difficult public relations problems we face, and of how I intend to proceed. As Francis Pym would, I think, also recognise, we are losing the defence/deterrence argument at present. The CND campaign is gathering strength but much more importantly, there is growing scepticism among a much wider and thinking section of the population about the correctness of the Trident decision. If we lose the Trident argument it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the wider defence posture of the government. I am convinced that Trident was the correct decision. But I must tell you that this is not, in my judgement, the general view of your Ministers, nor the unanimous view of the Ministry of Defence. Only the Defence Committee of our party seem free of doubts. We must win the argument in Whitehall, if we are to have any chance of convincing the outside world.

3. Part of the problem, as I see it, lies in the need, now, to convince people of the validity of a decision already taken, and



announced on behalf of the government, as opposed to seeking to persuade them to agree in advance to a course of action which is then adopted in the light of all views expressed during the period of decision taking. Unless we now bring the problems, arguments and facts more into the open, I think we will lose the debate, and that would be very serious for our security, and for the Alliance; it would also, indeed, be damaging to the Conservative Party. We are not warmongers conducting preparations in secret, but men and women of peace - faced by the threat of nuclear and conventional blackmail.

4. I am trying, through Francis, to arrange for a Parliamentary Debate on Trident in the first week in March. I need time personally to think about the strategic, military and moral issues - and the options - before the debate takes place. I shall be doing this through internal seminars within MOD and in talks with expert outsiders. In the Debate I shall open myself. I would like to make it mainly a debate on the philosophy of the strategic deterrent, rather than just an argument about resource allocation. I do not think that two Ministers can be expected to have the time to master the strategic options and philosophical arguments so that, unless there are strong objections, I feel that I must also wind up the debate personally.

5. Over the period around the Debate (starting in the third week of February) I am arranging for a substantial number of in-depth interviews on television and in the papers. We have had many useful requests to enter a serious debate on the moral and strategic issues. Francis may have views on how we can make a major comeback, in order to stop the thing slipping away. I wanted you to know at this stage, that I am aware of the problem - a major one, in my view - and that I am planning to meet it. But there will have to be a period of partial silence for a few weeks until I am ready to launch the counter-attack in a measured and coherent way.

SECRET



I am copying this minute on a personal basis to the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

JN .

Ministry of Defence

2nd February 1981