

NOTE OF LIAISON COMMITTEE MEETING HELD IN NO 10 DOWNING STREET
ON WEDNESDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 1982

Present:

Prime Minister
Lord President of the Council
Secretary of State for Scotland
Secretary of State for Employment
Chairman of the Party
Chief Secretary, Treasury
Minister of State, Treasury (Mr Wakeham)
Minister of State for Defence for the Armed Forces
Chief Press Secretary, No 10
Mr Winston Churchill MP
Marketing Director, Conservative Central Office
Director, Conservative Research Department
Mr Ward, Lord President of the Council's Office

1. Presentation of Defence Nuclear Policy

The Committee had before it a minute from the Lord President of the Council covering a report on the presentation of defence nuclear policy, including recommendations by the Minister of State for Defence. Introducing the report, the Lord President of the Council said that there was no doubt that the debate on defence nuclear policies had quickened. For many years there had been a broad public acceptance of the need for Britain to contribute to a western nuclear capability in the context of the NATO Alliance. But this consensus was now in danger. There were signs of public ambivalence and concern about nuclear weapon modernisation programmes, ie Cruise and Trident. There was increasingly a perceived divergence of interests as between the US, and its European allies. The Government had to retain public acceptance of existing nuclear defence policy and gain wider support for Cruise and Trident. Hard line CND activists were effectively immune from persuasion and the Government should direct its efforts towards reassuring those in the middle ground, who would normally support Conservative defence policies, but who

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had doubts about Cruise and Trident based for example on fears for conventional forces, anxiety about American intentions, or doubts about the strategy. It was also very important for the Government to exercise effective persuasion on the young, especially in the universities. The existing campaign was already comprehensive and clearly on the right lines. Its organisation, with the Ministry of Defence in the lead co-ordinating the activities of other Government Departments, the non-governmental organisations like BAC, and the Party's activities, was evidently the right one. But the campaign must now be accelerated, with greater impact both on opinion formers and the general public. To that end, he invited the Committee to endorse the recommendations made by the Minister of State for Defence in paragraph 27 of the report. The Ministers concerned, especially the Minister of State for Defence for the Armed Forces, were already hard pressed and this campaign was additional to their normal responsibilities. The Committee would further assist them if it were clearly to state that for Defence Ministers, despite their many other preoccupations, this campaign was now the highest political priority in the run-up to the election; and that resources must be concentrated accordingly.

The following points were raised in discussion:-

(a) There was general agreement that the target audience had been correctly identified in the Lord President of the Council's minute. It was interesting that evidence from CND's own poll confirmed that the young were the most likely to be influenced by CND activities. Allowance had to be made for slanted questioning in the CND poll, but even so, it had shown that a majority remained in favour of the existing US bases in this country. This suggested that forces, once stationed, became accepted in time; and provided that Cruise missiles could be introduced without undue outcry, the same might be true of them since command and control arrangements would be the same as applied to existing US forces in the United Kingdom.

(b) Undoubtedly 1983 would be a crucial year, with the planned arrival of the first Cruise missiles. The Government's opponents would step up their efforts. There was a risk of major demonstrations, and every effort must be made to avoid making it too easy for the Government's opponents to prepare a campaign. It would also be important to consider carefully how forthcoming the Government could be on the difficult issue of the US/UK agreements on joint decisions on the missiles' use.

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(c) It was important in presentational terms not to separate nuclear defence policy from the general theme of defence of the realm. This would help to counteract the strong anti-American, and pacifist, under-current in the CND movement.

(d) The Government's case had been damaged by criticisms from so-called experts who disliked the choice of Trident as the particular system to meet the requirement for an independent deterrent. The costs of Trident were widely misunderstood and it was important to put them in proper perspective.

(e) The point was made that the Soviet Union enjoyed a considerable superiority in chemical weapons - which they had used in South East Asia. This seemed to be too little recognised by the public, although it was an example of the Soviet Union acquiring an offensive capability which NATO had not sought to match. It was further noted that photographs and similar material deriving from intelligence sources had been used to good effect some years ago and that there would be advantage in trying to do so again. This required US agreement, which they had recently been reluctant to give; but they might be more sympathetic in the light of the experience of their own mid-term elections.

(f) It was noted that the MOD's new film had generally been well received. The COI expected to receive 150 bookings for the film in the first month. It was intended to seek further publicity for the film and to offer it widely to organisations likely to respond. The Minister of State for Defence had recently shown it to local newspaper editors in Leeds and they had reacted quite well. He was also pursuing contacts with the churches, and intended to ensure that all members of the forthcoming Church of England Synod received the relevant MOD literature.

(g) The meeting heard a verbal report on the Party activities which Mr Churchill was co-ordinating. It was somewhat disquieting that the BAC (an educational charity) was coming under some pressure from the Charities Commission in respect of its right to campaign using MOD literature. It was not clear who had put the Charities Commission up to this, but it was important for the BAC to be robust. The CDMD, working through the FCS in the universities, was proving quietly successful and already 10 disarmament societies had been set up in the universities. The FCS efforts would continue, and would include

constituency associations. Briefings had been arranged for Peers and back-benchers on 7 December and 26 January with the aim of familiarising them with the issues and encouraging them to promote the Government's case actively in their areas and constituencies.

(h) As well as Peers and back-benchers, it was important to involve the whole Party as widely as possible in this campaign. It should certainly figure prominently at the next candidates' conference, and at the next FCS conference. Constituency agents should be encouraged to show the MOD film at their association meetings.

The meeting approved the recommendations in the Lord President of the Council's minute, including the recommendations made by the Minister of State for Defence in paragraph 27 of the report. It was agreed that this decision should be communicated separately to the Secretary of State for Defence. It was also agreed that a guidance note for Ministers on the lines of the synopsis contained in Annex C to the report should be drawn up as quickly as possible by the MOD, FCO, Home Office and Conservative Central Office, and should be circulated promptly thereafter.

2. Diary of Events

The meeting considered the two notes circulated by the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary. In reviewing topics likely to arise before the end of the year it was noted that, in particular, steel imports were likely to be controversial. Recent imports from Japan and South America raised serious issues which the Prime Minister would discuss separately with the Secretary of State for Industry. Discussions which the NCB were having with the NUM about possible pit closures were receiving much publicity, but the correct course for the Government was to keep its distance and refrain from any comment which might make the NCB Chairman's position more difficult.

3. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held at 11.30 am on 15 December 1982 in No 10 Downing Street.

A Ward
Lord President of the Council's Office

30 November 1982

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Distribution:

Those present
Foreign and Commonwealth
Secretary
Minister of State, FCO
(Mr Hurd)
Minister of State, Home
Office (Mr Mayhew)