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PRIME MINISTERWITHSTANDING AN OIL TANKER DRIVERS' STRIKE

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In his minute A083/2896 of 13th October, Sir Robert Armstrong summarises a report by the Official Group on Oil Tanker Drivers and draws particular attention to three of the points which the Group identify for Ministerial decision.

2. My main concern is with the second point - the question of whether or not we should continue to stand by the policy of restricting the use of Servicemen to the maintenance of supplies or services essential to the maintenance of life or health. The most important reason for maintaining this policy is that it is generally accepted that the Government has a duty to maintain essential services in the interests of the Community as a whole. If, however, Servicemen are used to do work that goes beyond the maintenance of essential services, union acquiescence is less likely and there is a very real danger of sympathetic action in related areas. In the case of an oil tanker drivers' dispute sympathetic action elsewhere in the refining and distribution chain would soon stop supplies altogether - the Services have no capacity to intervene in these areas - and we should then lose even those supplies which are critical to maintain life and health.



3. Of course the term "essential services" is not well defined and what is acceptable on one occasion may not be so on another. We should therefore recognise that action against a particular strike will depend on the precise circumstances of the dispute and the state of popular sentiment at the time. For this reason our plans should be flexible and there should be no automatic presumption of the level and extent of service involvement in advance of a strike.

4. However I agree that it is necessary to identify the measures to withstand a long strike by the oil tanker drivers, so that the option is open to us should we wish to take it. I therefore agree that the CCU should be instructed to explore the feasibility and desirability of such a plan, and would be content to accept deliveries of the order of 70% of normal road-borne deliveries as a basis for such work. In order, however, to keep our options open I would like to see the CCU carry out their work in such a way that the plan they produce can be implemented in discrete steps in the light of our view of the circumstances of a particular dispute. The precise steps should, be left to the CCU to determine but I would like to see them reflect at least:

- a. the minimum level of essential supplies represented by Table 2 of the Group's report;
- b. the delivery capacity of the maximum number of Service drivers likely to be available in the UK (5,000);
- c. whatever may be necessary to provide the balance of the delivery capacity needed.

5. These steps would enable us to hold deliveries at a. if it were judged at the time that it would be counterproductive to go further and at b. if we thought that the political and operational



price of a temporary withdrawal of Servicemen from BAOR (referred to in paragraph 4.15 of the report) was too great.

6. On the remaining points which the Group identified for Ministerial decision, I am content for the CCU to invite the MOD to prepare plans so that the upgrading of Service Heavy Goods Vehicle drivers can be carried out as quickly as possible once a dispute has started to permit as many as possible of the Industry's larger tankers to be used in the event of a dispute. So far as the method of allocating supplies is concerned, my preference would be to use a combination of administrative action and general restrictions on consumption. I do not consider use of the price mechanism workable - not least because I have no doubt that it would be difficult to persuade the public that no-one was making windfall profits (whatever arrangements we made to prevent this) and they would blame the Government for this. If we accept the usual practice of administrative action it would be much easier to convince the public that the responsibility for any hardship lay with the strikers.

7. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Secretaries of State for Energy, Scotland, Employment, Trade and Industry, Transport and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "W. J. G." or similar, written in a cursive style.

Ministry of Defence

8th November 1983

IND Por: Industrial Action in Oil Industry

Nov '79



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