CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held in the Prime Minister's Room, House of Commons, S.W.1, on Wednesday, 22nd February, 1956, at 4 p.m.

Present:

The Right Hon. Sir Anthony Eden, M.P., Prime Minister.

The Most Hon. the Marquess of Salisbury, Lord President of the Council.


The Right Hon. Selwyn Lloyd, Q.C., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The Right Hon. James Stuart, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland.


The Right Hon. Duncan Sandys, M.P., Minister of Housing and Local Government.

The Right Hon. D. Heathcoat Amory, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

The Right Hon. Iain Macleod, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.

The Right Hon. Patrick Buchan-Hepburn, M.P., Minister of Works.

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. John Boyd-Carpenter, M.P., Minister of Pensions and National Insurance (Items 8-9).

The Right Hon. Edward Heath, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury (Items 1-9).

Secretariat:

The Right Hon. Sir Norman Brook.

Mr. H. O. Hooper.

Mr. J. M. Wilson.
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1. The Cabinet were informed of the business to be taken in the House of Commons in the two next following weeks.

On 27th February there would be a debate on Foreign Affairs. This would be opened by the Foreign Secretary, and the Prime Minister would reply to the debate.

The Statement on Defence would be debated on 28th and 29th February. This debate would be opened by the Minister of Defence: if it became necessary for a Government spokesman to deal with Civil Defence questions, the Home Secretary would intervene during the course of the first day: the Minister of Supply and the Secretary of State for Air would speak for the Government on the second day. The Army Estimates would be debated on 1st March. The Navy and Air Estimates would be debated during the week beginning 5th March.

The Second Reading of the Restrictive Trade Practices Bill would be taken on 5th or 6th March.

2. The Home Secretary said that, since the Cabinet’s discussion on 16th February, it had been found that two further members of the Northern Ireland Parliament had become disqualified through acceptance of offices of profit under the Crown. In these circumstances he had delayed the presentation of the White Paper and the Reports of the Select Committees on the earlier cases, so that all the known cases could be dealt with together.

The Cabinet—

Took note of the Home Secretary’s statement and agreed that the action which they had authorised on 16th February should be deferred until it became possible to deal comprehensively with all the cases of disqualification which had so far been identified in the Northern Ireland Parliament.

3. The Cabinet were informed that, following the debate in the House of Commons on his proposals for reducing the inflationary pressure in the national economy, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would give a broadcast talk on this subject on 25th February. It was also proposed that the Prime Minister, in company with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister of Labour, should discuss with representatives of the Trades Union Congress (T.U.C.) the measures which the Government had found it necessary to take to remedy the economic situation. The General Secretary of the T.U.C. had already been approached with a view to arranging an early date for this meeting.

In discussion it was suggested that, in view of these forthcoming discussions with representatives of the T.U.C., it might now be timely to publish the projected White Paper on the Implications of Full Employment. The Cabinet had decided on 1st December, 1955, that publication of this White Paper should be postponed for the time being. The Cabinet were informed that the Economic Policy Committee had decided, at a meeting earlier in the day, that the draft of this White Paper should be brought up to date and that a revised version should be submitted to the Cabinet with a view to its early publication.

The Cabinet—

Took note of these statements.
4. The Prime Minister recalled that on 11th January the Cabinet had agreed that, despite the objections which the Royal Fine Art Commission had raised to the demolition of the Collcutt building, the Government should proceed with their plan for constructing on this site new and enlarged premises for the Imperial College of Science. It had now been suggested to him that the Financial Secretary, Treasury, should hold a meeting with representatives of the Commission and of the University authorities concerned with a view to explaining the grounds for the Government’s decision and persuading the Commission to withdraw their objections to it. He doubted whether it would be expedient to take this course. The Government were already being criticised for failing to take earlier steps to expand the facilities for technological education. They should not risk the charge of further delay in the execution of their plan for enlarging the Imperial College.

In discussion some Ministers expressed regret at the decision to demolish the Collcutt building. It was a building of some architectural interest, and was a feature of the London skyline. Other Ministers expressed disquiet about the design of the new building which was to take its place. They suggested that this had little merit in itself and would not be congruous with the surrounding buildings. They thought it would be wise to consider any suggestions which the Fine Art Commission might have to make for improvement of the design of the new building.

In further discussion it was agreed that there might be advantage in holding a meeting with representatives of the Fine Art Commission, provided that it was made clear from the outset that the Government were not prepared to modify their decision to demolish the Collcutt building and to build new premises for the Imperial College on this site, and that the discussions could not be allowed to delay progress in the construction of the new building. On this understanding, however, the Government could offer to consider any comments which the Fine Art Commission might wish to make on the design of the new building.

The Cabinet—

Agreed that the Financial Secretary, Treasury, should be authorised to invite the comments of the Royal Fine Art Commission on the design of the new building for the Imperial College of Science, on the understanding that the Government were finally committed to proceed with this project and that this consultation with the Commission would not be allowed to delay its execution.

5. The Foreign Secretary said that he would shortly be meeting the Prime Minister of Egypt in Cairo. Subject to the Cabinet’s views, he proposed, in his discussions with Colonel Nasser, to take a firm line about the tone of Egyptian propaganda on British policy in the Middle East and to make plain the advantages to Egypt of a friendlier relation with the United Kingdom. It was not to be expected that, if Egypt showed such hostility towards us, we should continue to treat her as a friendly State and, for example, to give her financial assistance towards the construction of the Aswan High Dam. His object would be to make it clear that Egypt could not expect further help from us unless she changed her policy towards us.

In discussion it was pointed out that our decision to make a financial contribution towards the construction of the Aswan Dam had been taken, after full consideration, because it was thought to be in our interests to prevent the Soviet Government from obtaining contracts which would give them a foothold in Egypt. We could not lightly withdraw from this undertaking and certainly could not do so without prior consultation with the United States Government.
The Foreign Secretary said that he was not asking the Cabinet to reverse their decision about the Aswan Dam and would not propose, in his forthcoming discussions, to threaten to withdraw the offer of British assistance in this project. He need not at this stage be specific about the consequences which would follow if the Egyptians failed to modify their policy towards us. He need go no further at present than to emphasise the common advantages to both countries of a better understanding and friendlier relations between the United Kingdom and Egypt.

The Cabinet—

Took note with approval of the line which the Foreign Secretary proposed to take in his forthcoming discussions with the Prime Minister of Egypt.

6. In the debate in the House of Commons on 16th February, the Government motion commending the retention of capital punishment as the penalty for murder had been defeated, on a free vote, by 293 votes to 262. The Cabinet considered what course the Government should now take in the light of this expression of the view of the House of Commons. They had before them a memorandum on this question by the Home Secretary (C.P. (56) 43).

In discussion of the Home Secretary's memorandum the following points were made:

(a) There was general agreement that, as the Government had invited the House to support a motion for the retention of capital punishment, they could not now introduce a Government Bill to abolish it. Government supporters who had voted in favour of the motion would be unwilling to support Government legislation to the contrary effect.

(b) Doubts were expressed about the expediency of the alternative course, suggested by the Home Secretary, of providing Government time for the passage of the Death Penalty (Abolition) Bill which had been introduced by Mr. S. Silverman, M.P. This Bill provided that the death penalty for murder should be suspended for five years and that after a further five years it should be abolished altogether unless, in the intervening period, prayers for its continuance had been passed by both Houses of Parliament. The House of Commons had now declared for the abolition of the penalty, and it was undesirable that legislation should be passed which would have the effect of reopening the issue after a period of five years. Might it not be preferable that the leaders of the Labour Opposition should themselves promote a Bill providing for the abolition of the death penalty?

As against this it was argued that, if the principle of Mr. Silverman's Bill was confirmed on Second Reading, it would be open to the Government to move in the Committee Stage amendments which would transform the measure into one for the complete abolition of the death penalty. There was much to be said for allowing the House of Commons to proceed with this question on the basis of the Bill already before them. The Government would seem to be assuming a greater responsibility than they need if they took the initiative in inviting the leaders of the Labour Opposition to sponsor a different form of Bill.

(c) This should be treated as a Private Member's Bill. The Government should provide no facilities for it, apart from finding Government time for its discussion. In all proceedings on it Government supporters should be allowed a free vote.

(d) In the House of Lords there was a great body of authoritative legal opinion in favour of retaining the death penalty. Even if this Bill should pass the Commons, it was likely to be rejected by the
Lords. Public opinion on this question was divided and this would, therefore, be a proper occasion for the exercise of the power of the House of Lords to delay the passage of legislation. There were already indications of a growing volume of public support for the retention of the death penalty; and it was to be expected that this movement would grow during the period between the first rejection of the Bill by the House of Lords and its subsequent presentation to the Upper House.

(e) The Prime Minister said that some Government supporters had suggested to him that this issue should be decided by a referendum. To these suggestions he proposed to reply that this was essentially a matter for decision by Parliament itself and that the holding of a referendum on it would derogate from the sovereignty of Parliament.

The Cabinet then considered the terms of the statement which the Home Secretary proposed to make about the exercise of the prerogative of mercy in murder cases during the interval before a final decision on this question was taken by Parliament. The terms of his proposed statement were set out in paragraph 4 of C.P. (56) 43.

The Home Secretary said that, on further reflection, he thought it might be preferable not to state that, in deciding whether to recommend the exercise of the prerogative of mercy in any particular case, he would be influenced by the views on the subject of capital punishment which had been expressed in the House of Commons. He thought it preferable to deal with this point in the more general terms which had been used by Mr. Chuter Ede, M.P., in the statement which he had made, as Home Secretary, on 10th June, 1948. Mr. Ede had then stated that each case would be considered on its merits, "regard being had to the special considerations relating to that case and all other relevant considerations either of a public or private nature."

The Cabinet—

(1) Agreed that the Government should find Parliamentary time for a Second Reading of the Death Penalty (Abolition) Bill introduced by Mr. S. Silverman, M.P., and, if it obtained a Second Reading, for further proceedings on that Bill: and invited the Prime Minister to make an announcement to this effect in the House of Commons on the following day.

(2) Authorised the Home Secretary to make an early statement in the House of Commons about the exercise of the prerogative of mercy in murder cases, in the terms set out in paragraph 4 of C.P. (56) 43, subject to the amendment approved in their discussion and noted above.

7. The Cabinet had before them a note by the Lord Privy Seal, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister of Education (C.P. (56) 40) covering the draft of a White Paper on Technical Education which had been prepared under the supervision of a Committee of Ministers under the Chairmanship of the Lord Privy Seal. They also had before them a further memorandum by the Lord Privy Seal (C.P. (56) 46) recommending that the references in the draft White Paper to technological education at the Universities should be expanded in certain respects.

The Minister of Education said that the proposals outlined in the draft White Paper were designed to provide the maximum range of opportunities for technical education at all stages of the
educational system for pupils of all grades of mental capacity. Only in this way could we expect to keep abreast of the development of technical training in other countries. Our programme would bear comparison with that in the United States; but in the Soviet Union the training of technicians was taking place at a rate which would enable the Soviets to outstrip Western countries within ten or twenty years. The expenditure of £70 millions proposed in the White Paper would not enable us to keep pace with the Soviet Union: it was related to the resources, including resources in teachers, which would be at our command during the five-year period and it compared with an earlier plan for the expenditure of only £45 millions. We should have in mind a further expansion of our efforts after this five-year period; and he would therefore prefer to omit the words in paragraph 93 of the White Paper which implied that expenditure within this period would be conditional on prevailing economic circumstances. He also suggested that paragraph 5 of the White Paper should be expanded to refer more fully to the needs of Commonwealth countries and the Colonies.

In discussion the following points were made:

(a) It was agreed that paragraph 93 of the White Paper should be amended as proposed by the Minister of Education.

(b) It was suggested that paragraphs 105 and 106 might be omitted, as likely to give undue encouragement to the provision of technical libraries, financed largely by Exchequer grants. As against this it was argued that adequate library facilities were essential to the development of technical education and would also be of value to local industry. It was agreed that these paragraphs should be retained.

(c) It was generally felt that the White Paper would be thought to devote too little attention to technological education at the Universities and might on that account appear to be unbalanced. The further development of facilities for technological education at the Universities in the period 1957–62 could not be foreshadowed in the White Paper, as it would depend on the results of the quinquennial review which was now being held; but it would be possible to expand Chapter II of the draft so as to explain the reasons why the Government had decided to build their plans for higher technological education on the foundations already existing in the Universities and to describe more fully the facilities that had already been provided at the Universities.

(d) It was agreed that some reference to facilities for technical education for agriculture should be included in the White Paper. The existing facilities for this purpose were adequate for current requirements, but they would need to be expanded to meet increasing demands in the future.

(e) A Committee of Ministers under the Chairmanship of the Lord Privy Seal should be appointed to co-ordinate the programme of technical education and to supervise its execution.

The Cabinet—

(1) Invited the Lord Privy Seal, in consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister of Education, to expand Chapter II of the White Paper so as to give a fuller picture of the facilities to be provided for technological education at the Universities.

(2) Invited the Minister of Education to arrange for the amendment of the White Paper to take account of the points noted in paragraphs (a) and (d) above.

(3) Subject to the foregoing Conclusions, approved the draft White Paper annexed to C.P. (56) 40, and authorised the Minister of Education to present it to Parliament in the course of the following week.
(4) Appointed a Committee of Ministers consisting of—

Lord Privy Seal (Chairman),
Lord President,
Minister of Education,
Financial Secretary, Treasury,
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland,

to co-ordinate the programme for technical education envisaged in the White Paper and to supervise its execution.

8. The Cabinet considered a memorandum by the Lord Privy Seal (C.P. (56) 42) on the legislative programme for the current session. They also had before them memoranda by the Minister of Pensions (C.P. (56) 35 and 44) setting out the arguments in favour of the early introduction of the Family Allowances (Amendment) Bill and the Workmen’s Compensation Bill.

The Lord Privy Seal said that, though many Bills had been abandoned, there was an estimated deficit of nearly five weeks of Parliamentary time before the summer recess. The Restrictive Trade Practices Bill, a major piece of legislation which was to be taken on the floor of the House, had been introduced late in the session. The Cabinet had now decided that time must be found for legislation on capital punishment and it appeared that a Public Works Loans Bill could not be avoided. The Cabinet might feel it necessary to give further consideration to the claims of the Family Allowances (Amendment) Bill. But he felt that, in view of the congestion of the Parliamentary time-table, the remaining Bills listed in the Annex to his memorandum would have to be postponed until the following session. As an earnest of meeting the undertaking which had been given to the Public Accounts Committee, the Bill to give statutory authority to the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research might be introduced in this session, even though it could make no further progress. In order that no question might arise that the Government were weakening in their intention to introduce anti-dumping legislation he would announce that it was solely on account of pressure of Parliamentary business that the Imports (Special Duties) Bill had had to be deferred.

The following points were made in discussion:—

(a) Ministers had more than once reaffirmed the undertaking given in The Queen’s Speech to introduce legislation on family allowances in the current session. There was therefore a strong case for proceeding with this Bill. On the other hand, proposals to increase family allowances were not in tune with the current economic situation and the Bill, although short, might well prove controversial.

(b) The Colonial Secretary said that the Caribbean Conference had reached an agreement which was due to be signed on the following day and he had undertaken to attempt to secure before the summer recess the passage of the legislation which would be necessary to put the agreement into effect. He also considered that time should be found in the current session for legislation to validate certain undertakings of the Colonial Development Corporation and to provide for the reorganisation of the Oversea Civil Service.

(c) It was agreed that, although legislation on this subject would have to be deferred until the following session, the Home Secretary should enter into consultations with the Opposition on the provisions of the proposed Representation of the People Bill.

(d) The Bill to give statutory authority to the D.S.I.R. would provide for an Executive Council in place of the present Advisory
Council. The Chairman and the Secretary of the Executive Council had been nominated and it would be embarrassing if, because the Bill could not be enacted in this session, a year's delay should elapse before the new organisation could be brought into being. The Bill would not be contentious.

The Cabinet—

(1) Agreed to consider further at a later meeting whether an attempt should be made to enact the Family Allowances (Amendment) Bill in the current session.

(2) Invited the Lord Privy Seal to determine the remainder of the content of the legislative programme, in consultation with the Ministers concerned, taking into account the points made in the Cabinet's discussion.

9. The Cabinet again considered whether any increase should be made in the 10s. basic pension for widows.

_The Minister of Pensions_ said that there was no logical case for increasing the rate of this pension. There would, however, be political pressure in favour of an increase; and it would be unfortunate if the Government, having taken a stand against making an increase, were subsequently forced to give way.

In discussion it was recognised that the Government would be under strong pressure to increase the rate of this pension, more especially since they were taking steps to increase the prices of bread and milk. On the other hand, the Cabinet were informed that feeling on this point among Government supporters in the House of Commons was less vehement than had been expected.

_The Chancellor of the Exchequer_ said that in present economic circumstances he would prefer that no change should be made in respect of this pension. If it were agreed that there should be no increase in the rate, he would withdraw his earlier suggestion that there should be no new issues.

The Cabinet—

(1) Agreed that no change should be made in the existing provision for the basic 10s. pension for widows.

(2) Authorised the Minister of Pensions to make an announcement to this effect in the statement which he was proposing to make on the recommendations in the report on widows' benefits which he had received from the National Insurance Advisory Committee.

10. _The Minister of Transport_ said that the British Transport Commission were likely to incur a deficit of about £60 millions on their operations in the current year. This would raise their cumulative deficit to about £140 millions. To meet this prospective deficit on the current year's account the Commission proposed to increase their revenue by about £40 millions by a 10 per cent. increase in freight charges, which would bring in an additional £26 millions a year, and by various minor adjustments of passenger fares. For the proposed increase in freight charges the authority of the Minister would be required, but the additional revenue from passenger fares could be raised by using up the unexhausted margin in the 2d. maximum authorised by the Passenger Charges Scheme, by eliminating a number of the present sub-standard fares in London and, with the approval of the Transport Tribunal, by removing certain anomalies in the existing London fares system. The
Transport Commission had already submitted to the Transport Tribunal a comprehensive scheme for freight charges which would allow them greater flexibility in their freight charges. It had been hoped that this scheme would be introduced by May this year, but owing to the numerous representations which had been made by industry about its details it now seemed unlikely that it could be introduced before the end of the year. The proposed 10 per cent increase would therefore apply to the existing scheme of freight charges.

A further problem which faced the Commission was a settlement of the superannuation scheme for their employees. The present financial arrangements of the Commission were not entirely satisfactory. Discussions were in progress between the Commission and the Treasury about the control of capital investment. There would be advantage in expanding the scope of these discussions to cover the general accounting system of the Commission. It would not be necessary to make a public announcement about an internal review of this nature.

In discussion concern was expressed about the effect of the proposed increase of 10 per cent, in freight charges in raising manufacturing costs and thus impairing the competitive power of British industry in export markets. On the other hand, it was recognised that there would be political objections to raising passenger fares without making some increase in freight charges. The recent wages settlement had increased the wage bill of the Commission by £30 millions. Though there were advantages in bringing home to the public the close connection between this increase in the wage bill and the subsequent increase in fares by making the adjustment as soon as possible, there might well be criticism that the wage increase had been granted precipitately.

Several Ministers suggested that the Cabinet should have a further opportunity to consider these proposals before a final decision was taken.

The Cabinet—

Invited the Minister of Transport to circulate a memorandum on the financial position of the British Transport Commission and their proposals for increasing their revenue.

Malaya.  
(Previous Reference :  
C. M. (56) 9th Conclusions, Minute 7.)

11. The Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Colonial Secretary (C.P. (56) 47) covering the report of the Conference on Constitutional Advance in Malaya.

The Colonial Secretary said that in Annex C of his memorandum he had listed the main points to which he wished to draw the attention of the Cabinet. All the issues before the Conference had been settled amicably and the agreed recommendations were within the scope of the authority which he had been given by the Cabinet on 17th January. The Conference of Rulers in Malaya were meeting on 28th February to consider the report, and he would like to be able to inform the High Commissioner in Malaya before that date of the Government's views on the report.

In discussion the following points were made:—

(a) All the recommendations relating to defence and internal security had been considered and approved by the Chiefs of Staff and the Minister of Defence.

(b) The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the financial arrangements appeared to be satisfactory. Although he had not yet had an opportunity to study them in detail, he was prepared to accept
the financial and economic recommendations listed in Annex C of C.P. (56) 47 on the understanding that they reflected fully the position agreed by the Conference.

(c) The outcome of the Conference would be generally welcomed by other members of the Commonwealth. In the Federation of Malaya a fund of goodwill had been built up and it would be unwise to attempt to postpone the meeting of the Rulers.

The Cabinet—

(1) Approved the report of the Conference on Constitutional Advance in Malaya, including the proposals for the Constitutional Commission as approved by the Conference.

(2) Authorised the Colonial Secretary to inform the High Commissioner in Malaya of the Government's attitude to the report.

Cyprus.

(Previous Reference: C.M. (56) 8th Conclusions, Minute 4.)

12. The Colonial Secretary said that the Governor of Cyprus was now on the point of concluding his discussions with Archbishop Makarios. On the main issues which had previously been discussed by the Cabinet, the Governor and the Archbishop had come very near to reaching an agreement. At this final stage, however, the Archbishop had put the agreement in jeopardy by asking for an amnesty for all political offenders in Cyprus, including those now lying under sentence of death. The Governor was most reluctant to make any offer of an amnesty until the Archbishop had abjured the use of violence and had given practical proof of his ability to induce his followers to abandon it.

The Cabinet—

Invited the Colonial Secretary to submit a memorandum defining the stage reached in the discussions between the Governor of Cyprus and Archbishop Makarios, and reserved their decision on the question of an amnesty in Cyprus until they had had an opportunity of considering this memorandum.

Nuclear Weapons.

Tests in 1957.

(Previous Reference: C.M. (55) 46th Conclusions, Minute 1.)

13. The Minister of Defence said that planning for the series of nuclear weapon tests to be held in the South-West Pacific in the spring of 1957 was now reaching the stage when some information about the operation, which had hitherto been confined to a strictly limited number of people, would have to be given a wider circulation if the necessary preparations were to be completed in time. For example, the military advance party, consisting of volunteers, was due to leave this country by mid-June. A dredger would also have to be chartered in Australia for deepening the harbour facilities at Christmas Island. These overt preparations would increase the risk that knowledge of the operation would leak out. The Minister of Supply had therefore suggested that a short announcement about the tests should be made during the forthcoming Defence debate.

In discussion, doubts were expressed about the need to make an official announcement so far in advance of the date proposed for the tests. Such an announcement would stimulate political controversy on the general question of nuclear tests, which might be more embarrassing than an unofficial leakage about the operation. All
necessary preparations should therefore proceed and the risk of an unofficial leakage about the operation should be accepted.

The Cabinet—

Agreed that all necessary preparations for the nuclear weapon tests in the South-West Pacific in 1957 should go forward, but that no announcement about them should be made for the time being.

Cabinet Office, S.W. 1,
22nd February, 1956.