CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street on Tuesday, 11 January, 1972, at 11.30 a.m.

Present:
The Right Hon. EDWARD HEATH, M.P., Prime Minister
The Right Hon. REGINALD MAULDING, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department
The Right Hon. LORD HAIGHMAN OF ST. MARYLEBONE, Lord Chancellor
The Right Hon. WILLIAM WHITEHALL, M.P., Lord President of the Council
The Right Hon. ROBERT CARR, M.P., Secretary of State for Employment (Items 1-3)
The Right Hon. GORDON CAMPBELL, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland
The Right Hon. PETER WALKER, M.P., Secretary of State for the Environment
The Right Hon. JAMES PRIOR, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
The Right Hon. SIR ALEC DOUGLAS-MAC, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
The Right Hon. ANTHONY BARBER, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer (Items 1-4)
The Right Hon. LORD CARRINGTON, M.P., Secretary of State for Defence
The Right Hon. MARGARET THATCHER, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Science
The Right Hon. THE EARL JELLICOE, Lord Privy Seal
The Right Hon. PETER THOMAS, Q.C., M.P., Secretary of State for Wales
The Right Hon. JOHN DAVIES, M.P., Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and President of the Board of Trade

Also Present:
The Right Hon. FRANCIS PYM, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

Secretariat:
Mr. N. F. CAIRNCROSS
SIR PHILIP ADAMS
Mr. P. J. HUDSON
Mr. B. G. TUCKER
Mr. J. ANSON
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1. The Cabinet were informed of the business to be taken in the House of Commons in the following week.

2. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that the visit of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Bangla Desh leader, to London following his release from imprisonment in West Pakistan had come as a surprise. President Bhutto of Pakistan had been unwilling for him to be flown by Pakistan aircraft to Dacca or Delhi and had offered a number of alternative destinations in Asia; Sheikh Mujib had himself preferred London to any of these and had subsequently accepted the offer of transportation to Dacca by RAF aircraft in preference to an Indian aircraft which was also on offer. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary judged that President Bhutto was now reconciled to the loss of East Pakistan, but that this was not yet wholly accepted by the public in West Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib had indicated that there was no prospect of establishing any formal links between Bangla Desh and Pakistan and that he would welcome early British recognition of his State. This presented problems for us; in particular it could not be said that our normal criteria for recognition had been met so long as the Indian Army remained in Bangla Desh in force. Nevertheless, the presence of the Indian Army was probably essential for the maintenance of internal security, while to recognise Bangla Desh soon would usefully strengthen the moderates there and would be likely to serve our substantial commercial interests. He was consulting President Bhutto and the United States Government and proposed to give further consideration to the possibility of early recognition when he had received their views.

The Prime Minister said he had been favourably impressed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Considering that he had been imprisoned for months, much of the time in solitary confinement, he appeared well informed and reasonable. He had made it clear that he intended to be master within Bangla Desh; that he wanted the Indian Army to withdraw just as soon as this could safely be arranged; and that in international relations he would tend to steer Bangla Desh along a non-aligned course, although he was anxious to establish close relations with this country and with other members of the Commonwealth. It had been explained to him that while we should do our best to grant early recognition we considered it important that this should not be rushed; it would be wise to wait at least until we had seen more clearly how relations between the three States which now existed in the sub-continent were likely to develop.

In a brief discussion it was noted that immediate arrangements to resume the shipment of jute for the Dundee industry had already been made; in the longer term the dependability of supplies would be affected by the attitude of the Government of Bangla Desh and by the arrangements which we were able to make with them.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that it was agreed that there were strong arguments for the early recognition of Bangla Desh and that the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary was authorised to arrange for this when he judged that the
appropriate time had come; some of our European allies and the older Commonwealth countries might be glad to recognise at about the same time as ourselves. Although it was right that the views of the United States Government should be sought we were under no obligation to them in the matter.

The Cabinet—

(1) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister’s summing up of their discussion.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that following our decision to begin a withdrawal from Malta rather than accede to the demand of the Prime Minister of Malta, Mr. Mintoff, that we should make a further payment of £4.25 million by 31 December, there had been further discussions with our allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), some of whose members were showing signs of weakening in their attitude to Mr. Mintoff’s demands. The North Atlantic Council were meeting that day. It was to be hoped that they would confirm that NATO’s offer to Malta for an annual payment remained at £9.5 million and would accept that any further offers of bilateral assistance they might now wish to put forward should be subject to the signature of a satisfactory defence agreement. The latest message from Mr. Mintoff was unbalanced and intemperately worded, however, and it remained very doubtful whether we had any real hope of doing more than achieve an orderly withdrawal.

The Secretary of State for Defence said that the danger of a split between ourselves and our allies on the handling of Mr. Mintoff now appeared somewhat to have receded but the situation in Malta itself was still dangerous. The withdrawal date which Mr. Mintoff had now stipulated (15 January) might be the occasion for attempts to harass our forces. All dependants would by then have left but it would take a total of about three months to withdraw our forces and their equipment, which totalled some 80,000 tons and was valued at £20–25 million. Even to withdraw the forces without their equipment would take until the end of January. Supplies of CS gas and rubber bullets had been despatched in order to deal with possible riot situations which the Malta Government might seek to engineer.

In discussion it was pointed out that, apart from its intrinsic demerits, a situation in which large quantities of stores were left behind in Malta could create some domestic political difficulty. It was also noted that Archbishop Gonzi, during his brief visit to London earlier that week, had expressed great anxiety about the policies of the present Malta Government. His only suggestion, however, had been that NATO’s offer should be increased to £15 million a year, on the basis that if Mr. Mintoff refused such an offer public opinion would compel him to abandon office. Our position, including our unwillingness to provide any more cash ourselves, had been made clear to him.
The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that we had made all the dispositions necessary to complete an orderly withdrawal. The next move would probably depend on the outcome of the North Atlantic Council’s discussion that day. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary would no doubt wish to put to his colleagues on the Defence and Oversea Policy Committee in the near future his proposals for dealing with the developing situation. It should at that stage also be possible to take a decision on the publication of a White Paper, a draft of which had been circulated to the Cabinet by the Secretary of State under cover of his note CP (72) 4.

The Cabinet—

(2) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister’s summing up of their discussion, and invited the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to proceed accordingly.

The Secretary of State for Employment gave the Cabinet an account of developments leading to the breakdown of pay negotiations between the National Coal Board (NCB) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the national miners’ strike which had begun on 9 January. He had invited both sides to the Department of Employment on 7 January, in line with practice adopted for previous disputes, so that he could be fully informed of their positions; but the NUM had refused the invitation. They had also refused, as they were fully entitled to do under their agreements, to invoke the industry’s arbitration machinery. Although some miners might have been ready to accept the NCB’s last pay offer, all were observing the official strike; in some militant areas the NUM’s advice that their members should undertake work necessary to maintain safety in the mines was being disregarded and this was a cause of some concern. The NUM’s attempt to rally official support from other unions for the strike had met with a poor response, but they were likely to secure some backing unofficially or at local level, for example in preventing the movement of imported coal from the ports. The absence of financial help from other unions would not embarrass the NUM, since they would not be paying strike benefit to their members, who would, however, be receiving any tax refunds to which they might be entitled, and Supplementary Benefit in respect of their families subject to the more stringent rules recently introduced as regards its assessment.

It must be expected that the strike would continue for at least a month but, having regard to its importance for the battle against inflation, the Government should resolve not to seek a settlement at a price higher than the cost of the NCB’s last pay offer. It seemed unlikely that this objective could be achieved by resort to arbitration or a court of inquiry. The Government would thus need to be ready, at the appropriate time, to offer themselves to conciliate, despite the risks involved in their becoming identified with the settlement. He had considered but rejected use of the provision in the Industrial Relations Act enabling him to apply for a restraint
order to defer the strike, since it would have been difficult to meet the “emergency effects test” to justify such an application, or to argue that the strike had been called without leaving adequate opportunities for negotiation or that its deferment would be conducive to a settlement. There might at a later stage be a case for seeking from the National Industrial Relations Court a ballot order to test support of the strike, particularly if a proposal emerged from conciliation which the NUM were disinclined to put to their membership themselves. His Department were accordingly making contingency plans against the possible need to apply for a ballot order at some future date, though he would have preferred that the first use of this power should be made in a less important dispute than the coal strike.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that a duty room had been set up in his Department to monitor developments and to deal with day-to-day problems arising during the strike; officials of all interested Departments would also be meeting regularly. The strike should have no immediate effects on the electricity or gas industries and stocks generally were good; sporadic shortages would however arise and, in particular, steel production was likely to be affected. He agreed that it would be inappropriate to invoke the Industrial Relations Act at present, but this would need to be reconsidered should it become necessary to take emergency powers.

In discussion, there was general agreement that sure handling of the dispute would be of critical importance to the continued success of the Government’s policies for reducing cost inflation and the level of wage settlements. A prolonged strike would however cause growing difficulties with fuel supplies, and possibly individual hardship, particularly if the weather were cold. The miners still commanded a considerable degree of public sympathy, with which the Opposition would seek to identify themselves, and after Parliament resumed the Government could expect to be under mounting political challenge over their handling of the dispute. The Government should appear neither over anxious about the strike nor indifferent to promoting a settlement. So far as possible they should avoid becoming directly involved in a confrontation with the miners and should leave the day-to-day handling of developments to the NCB. But it must be their firm objective to secure that the ultimate resumption of work would be on the basis of concessions no greater than those on offer to the miners before the strike. When the time came for conciliation or it became necessary to take emergency powers, parallel consideration should be given to the use of the ballot order provisions of the Industrial Relations Act. Meanwhile the presentational handling of the dispute both by Ministers and the NCB would be of great importance, and while it would normally be desirable to leave the industry itself to play the major part, the NCB’s handling of publicity for their side of the case had so far been uncertain.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the Lord President of the Council and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should urgently give further consideration to public
presentational aspects of the dispute; the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should also arrange for a daily progress report of developments during the strike to be supplied to himself, the Home Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Lord President and the Secretaries of State for Defence, for Social Services, for Employment, for Scotland, for the Environment and for Wales. The Home Secretary should arrange for the Ministerial and Official Committees on Emergencies to make regular assessments of the situation as the strike proceeded.

The Cabinet—

(1) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister’s summing up of their discussion and invited the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to be guided accordingly.

(2) Invited the Lord President of the Council, in consultation with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to make appropriate arrangements for ensuring the public presentation by the Government and the National Coal Board was handled to best advantage.

CONFIDENTIAL

4. The Cabinet considered a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (CP (72) 2), to which was appended a draft White Paper on Metrication.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that in November 1970, and subsequently the Government had promised to publish a White Paper setting out their policy on Metrication, and had also indicated that Statutory Instruments on the subject would not be made in the meantime. Evidence was now appearing in the National Press of the mounting concern in industry about the delay in publishing the White Paper; and delay would increase the cost of metrication. There was also growing public and Parliamentary interest in the directive which had been adopted by the European Economic Community (EEC) on units of measurement. A White Paper was the best means of explaining Government policy on the subject, while any further delay would tend to give an impression that the Government had something to hide and would thus play into the hands of those Members of Parliament who opposed United Kingdom entry to the EEC. The draft White Paper appended to his memorandum took account of recent developments in the EEC and of the views expressed on earlier drafts by the Ministerial Committee on Economic Policy. The passage on the EEC directive reflected the agreement reached with the Community on 22 December under which all our units would remain lawful until the end of 1979 and some might be retained beyond then: the precise text of this passage might, however, need amendment in the light of the terms in which this agreement was expressed in the Treaty. A particular problem had arisen over the passage in the White Paper dealing with the pricing of groceries sold in standard...
size packets. It was important that the Government should be seen to be taking firm action to ensure that food manufacturers and retailers did not take the opportunity of metrification to increase their profit margins. In his view, a statement in purely general terms would be inadequate to reassure consumers on this point. The draft White Paper therefore suggested the possibility of requiring these goods to be marked with comparative prices in both metric and imperial quantities, although it also indicated that this proposal would be discussed with the industry and the consumer organisations, and that the Government would be willing to consider any effective alternative method of ensuring that the consumer would not be exploited. If the Cabinet agreed, and subject to any necessary drafting amendments to the passage dealing with the EEC directive, he proposed that the White Paper should be published at the earliest practicable date.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that he fully agreed with the need to help the housewife to get value for money during the period of metrification. This would however be much more difficult than on the occasion of decimalisation. The suggestion that the White Paper should mention comparative pricing had been raised only recently, and such soundings as he had since been able to make in the food industry indicated that even the most efficient members of the retail trade would see serious difficulties in its introduction. If the Government were to commit themselves to this particular proposal now it would be more difficult to draw back later, and the trade would be led to argue both that metrification would be harmful to the consumer and that the Government were responsible for additional costs which were being passed on in higher prices. Full discussion was necessary with the trade before any particular proposal was endorsed, and in the meantime it would be preferable simply to say in general terms that the Government were determined to protect the consumer and would be discussing with the interested bodies how best to achieve this objective. He also did not agree with the judgment in Annex II of the draft White Paper that the food industry would be gravely handicapped if it were obliged to adhere to imperial-sized packets on the home market; and he would prefer to see this Annex omitted altogether, on the ground that its inclusion would exaggerate the importance of food problems in the context of metrification.

In discussion it was argued that the Confederation of British Industry was pressing for early publication of the White Paper, and it would not seem practicable to defer publication until after consultations with the food industry had taken place. The inclusion of the proposal for comparative pricing had been intended to allay the fears of the housewife about the effect of metrification on food prices, and consumer interests would criticise the White Paper if it only offered general reassurances on this issue. On the other hand, it was suggested that manufacturing industry was anyway pressing ahead with metrification as quickly as it thought desirable. There was a real risk that metrification would be taken as an occasion by the retail trade to increase prices unduly, and it would be unfortunate if the trade were enabled to argue that this was due to Government
action. Retailers would in any case be concerned about the additional work falling on them in connection with the value added tax, and given the concern that would be felt by the public generally on metrication, it might be better not to commit the Government at this stage to particular controversial proposals.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the Cabinet considered that the draft White Paper should seek to reassure the consumer without committing the Government to any specific method to protect him against unwarranted increases in the price of foodstuffs. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should consider, in consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Lord President of the Council and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, how the draft White Paper could best be modified accordingly. Subject to this and to any further minor drafting amendments which might be necessary, the Secretary of State should then arrange for publication on a date to be agreed with the Lord President.

The Cabinet—

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion, and invited the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to proceed accordingly.

CONFIDENTIAL

Local Elections
Minimum Age for Candidates

5. The Cabinet had before them a memorandum (CP (72) 3) by the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the minimum qualifying age for candidates for local elections.

The Home Secretary said that the Opposition had tabled an amendment for the Committee Stage of the Local Government Bill to reduce the minimum qualifying age for membership of a local authority from 21 to 18. The Home and Social Affairs Committee had considered the possibility of announcing before the amendment was debated a decision to make the change for local elections or alternatively of allowing a free vote upon the issue. It was, however, thought that there would be misgivings, particularly among Government supporters, and in any event either of those courses would largely pre-empt a decision on whether a corresponding change should be made for Parliamentary elections. The Committee had, therefore, concluded that the best course would be to take the initiative by announcing immediately that the question of a change for Parliamentary elections would be referred to a Speaker's Conference later in the year; meanwhile the amendment would be opposed on the ground that a decision in relation to local elections should wait the outcome of the Conference.

The Secretary of State for the Environment said that the Opposition appeared to be firmly committed to reducing the minimum age for membership of a local authority to 18 and that a proposal to convene a Speaker's Conference would not prevent them from pressing amendment on the Committee Stage and possibly further on Report. The Government's opposition to it at each stage
would involve them in unpopularity which would be needless if ultimately a Speaker's Conference were to recommend the change, and it was decided to reduce the age both for Parliamentary and local elections. A person who was entitled to vote for local government elections at the age of 18 should logically be qualified to stand in such elections.

In discussion serious doubt was expressed over the wisdom of making the change immediately. The fact that the minimum age for voting was 18 did not lead logically to the conclusion that the minimum age for membership of Parliament or a local authority should be correspondingly reduced. Exercising the responsibilities of an elected representative was quite different from casting a vote. A situation of particular concern might arise if a student of 18 was elected in a university town on the strength of the votes of his fellow students, who could, under the law as it now stood, be registered in that town. Moreover it would be incongruous if a student of the age of 18 became a member of the local authority that employed his own teachers, who themselves were debarred from membership of that authority. But in any event a decision on local authority qualifications should not be taken in advance of a decision on the qualifications for membership of Parliament. There was some danger even in a decision to convene a Speaker's Conference, since the balance of probability was that such a Conference would recommend a reduction in the age; and there was a case for standing firmly against the change and taking no further action. It was argued on the other hand that the reduction of the qualifying age for membership did not mean that any substantial numbers of people under 21 would be elected; it was simply a question of enlarging the choice available to the electorate, and allowing those over 18 to offer themselves for election.

In further discussion the following points were made:

(a) For general purposes 18 was now the age of majority. If the minimum age for membership of Parliament and of local authorities was reduced, it would be hard to avoid making 18 the minimum qualifying age also for jury service and this might be a matter of greater concern.

(b) If a Speaker's Conference were convened, to consider the age qualification, it should be asked to consider also the student's residential qualification for voting.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the general view of the Cabinet was that it would be unwise to make an immediate change for local government purposes. A Speaker's Conference was the proper machinery for considering changes of this kind in the qualification for membership of Parliament; and it was generally agreed that a decision to alter that qualification ought not to be prejudiced by an earlier change in the qualification for membership of a local authority. The Opposition might be persuaded to recognise this. The Lord President of the Council, in consultation with the Home Secretary, should sound out the Opposition Parties on their attitude to the proposal that a Speaker's Conference should be convened to consider the Parliamentary age qualification (and also the student's residential qualification for
voting) and a decision on the local government qualification deferred. The result of this consultation should be reported to him and he would consider whether the matter should be further discussed in Cabinet.

The Cabinet—

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion, and invited the Lord President of the Council to proceed accordingly.

Cabinet Office,
