

SUBJECT
to MASTER

CONFIDENTIAL



FILE

BC Mr. Gregson

R M

Mr. Pascall

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

5 April, 1984.

Dear John,

Environmental Pollution

The Prime Minister held a meeting today to consider the Report of the Official Committee on Environmental Pollution which was circulated under cover of a minute from Sir Robert Armstrong dated 30 March. Also before the meeting was a letter from the Private Secretary to the Lord President of the Council dated 3 April. In addition to your Secretary of State, those present were the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Employment, Trade and Industry, Energy, Scotland and Transport, the Minister of Agriculture, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department of the Environment (Mr. Waldegrave).

Your Secretary of State said that there was a need both for improved presentation of the Government's stance on environmental pollution, and for substantive progress on certain issues. The areas which posed particular difficulty included acid rain, which presented a serious long-term problem in environmental management, to which there was as yet no clear scientific solution; vehicle emissions where we had so far resisted successfully pressure to adopt catalytic conversion, on the grounds that our own technology was superior; the re-processing, storage and disposal of radio-active waste; and pollution of the North Sea, where the United Kingdom was alone in the extent to which sewage sludge and other wastes were still discharged.

In discussion there was broad agreement that the Government's response to the 10th Report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution would provide a useful opportunity to improve the presentation of policy. It would be right to take credit for the United Kingdom's good record in matters such as air and water pollution. In public discussion, it would be important to put across the scientific basis on which decisions had to be taken, so that the costs and benefits of alternative options could be weighed. It might well be necessary to accord greater priority to research, but the way in which existing funds were directed would also bear scrutiny. Past experience showed that research had to be started early if it was to make its proper contribution to decision making.

CONFIDENTIAL

/ It

RW

It was argued that the Official Report placed too little emphasis on the costs of stricter pollution control. Nearly all economic activity caused some pollution of the environment - the question was whether the degree of pollution was actually harmful. For this reason, the concept of "Best Available Technology" as a basis for the setting of international standards was both damaging and expensive. We were right to take advantage of our climate and topography. Accordingly, we should maintain our preference for "Environmental Quality Objectives", and for the concept of "Best Practical Means" which had been part of British law for a long time.

It was also argued, however, that we should not discount the possibility of alternative approaches in some areas where they were supported by a strong body of international opinion. The North Sea and acid rain might be examples.

Differing views were expressed on the merits of public disclosure, particularly in relation to the nuclear industry. On the one hand, it was important to keep the confidence of the industry, and avoid fuelling exaggerated fears. On the other hand, as the Royal Commission had pointed out, any unnecessary secrecy could cause acute political difficulty, if, for example, an incident occurred. Reference was made to the fate of the American nuclear industry, which had been virtually killed off by excessive environmental controls. Those who argued against nuclear power in this country believed that fossil fuels could take the place of nuclear power generation. But attention would then concentrate still more on acid rain. Counter measures were possible, but could cost in the region of £50 million per power station.

Initial consideration was given to the summary of points for Ministers at the end of the Official Report. Although firm decisions were not reached, there was support for the general policy stance set out in paragraph 51a with the qualification that the importance of cost considerations might be brought out further. The recommendations on research (paragraph 51b) should refer not only to the priority given to environmental pollution research, but also to the need for better direction of funds already available. On acid deposition (paragraph 51g) it was agreed to await the further report from officials. On vehicle emissions (paragraph 51h) it was agreed that the United Kingdom should maintain vigorously its preference for "lean burn" as opposed to catalytic convertors as a route to the reduction of nitrogen oxide emissions. On radio-active waste (paragraph 51i) it was noted that the Secretary of State for the Environment was considering the adequacy of the proposed inquiry procedures for the disposal of waste on land. The situation at Sellafield was judged to be under control, although the disadvantages of an ageing plant were becoming increasingly obvious. On pollution at sea (paragraph 51j) the meeting noted with satisfaction that the United Kingdom had secured agreement to its view that discussions at the forthcoming conference should be based on firm scientific evidence. On agriculture and the environment (paragraph 51k) no conclusion was reached, although concern was expressed on the one hand about the costs of the Wild Life and Countryside Act, 1981, and on the other about the dangers of interfering with a new financial mechanism at such a sensitive time.

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that, since it would probably not be possible to publish the Government's response to the 10th Report before the autumn, it was desirable to publish a statement of the Government's achievements and aims relating to environmental pollution before the Economic Summit. The Secretary of State for the Environment should now put in hand the drafting of such a statement which would be discussed by the same group of Ministers in mid-May. It might also be desirable at that meeting to consider papers on some specific issues requiring Ministerial decision around that time, for example the United Kingdom's negotiating line in the international discussions in June on acid deposition.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), David Normington (Department of Employment), Callum McCarthy (Department of Trade and Industry), Michael Reidy (Department of Energy), John Graham (Scottish Office), Dinah Nichols (Department of Transport), Ivor Llewelyn (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), John Gieve (Chief Secretary's Office), Joan Dunn (Mr. Waldegrave's Office, Department of the Environment) and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

(David Barclay)

J. Ballard, Esq.,
Department of the Environment



David

Well done! I suggest altering the summarizing - up paragraph on the basis of the attached, for the following reasons:

- we don't want another general discussion,
- we ought to give the back of ^{drafting} the pre-Summit statement to the European Ministers, rather than the Cabinet Office; good rhetoric does not usually emerge from Official Committees;
- I want to have a free hand in deciding which other papers and from which sources should come to the mid-May meeting;

David



- I have said "autumn" rather than
"end of Session" advisedly; although
they seemed to contemplate the reply
slipping beyond the end of the Session
(which DoB interpret as prorogation i.e.
end October); the Government is
committed to the House to publication
"before the end of the Session".

RF
6/4

X

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that, since it would probably not be possible to publish the Government's response to the 10th Report before the autumn, it was desirable to publish a statement of the Government's achievements and aims relating to environmental pollution before the Economic Summit. The Secretary of State for the Environment should now put in hand the drafting of such a statement which would be discussed by the same group of Ministers in mid-May. It might also be desirable at that meeting to consider papers on some specific issues requiring Ministerial decision around that time, for example the United Kingdom's negotiating line in the international discussions in June on acid deposition.



10 DOWNING STREET

Mr. Gregson

DB
2/4

For any comments please.

With the compliments of

David Barclay

5 April 1984

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

5 April, 1984.

Environmental Pollution

The Prime Minister held a meeting today to consider the Report of the Official Committee on Environmental Pollution which was circulated under cover of a minute from Sir Robert Armstrong dated 30 March. Also before the meeting was a letter from the Private Secretary to the Lord President of the Council dated 3 April. In addition to your Secretary of State, those present were the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Employment, Trade and Industry, Energy, Scotland and Transport, the Minister of Agriculture, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department of the Environment (Mr. Waldegrave).

Your Secretary of State said that there was a need both for improved presentation of the Government's stance on environmental pollution, and for substantive progress on certain issues. The areas which posed particular difficulty included acid rain, which presented a serious long-term problem in environmental management, to which there was as yet no clear scientific solution; vehicle emissions ~~were~~ where we had so far resisted successfully pressure to adopt catalytic conversion, on the grounds that our own technology was superior; the re-processing, storage and disposal of radio-active waste; and pollution of the North Sea, where the United Kingdom was alone in the extent to which sewage sludge and other wastes were still discharged.

In discussion there was broad agreement that the Government's response to the 10th Report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution would provide a useful opportunity to improve the presentation of policy. It would be right to take credit for the United Kingdom's good record in matters such as air and water pollution. In public discussion, it would be important to put across the scientific basis on which decisions had to be taken, so that the costs and benefits of alternative options could be weighed. It might well be necessary to accord greater priority to research, but the way in which existing funds were directed would also bear scrutiny. Past experience showed that research had to be started early if it was to make its proper contribution to decision making.

CONFIDENTIAL

/ It

It was argued that the Official Report placed too little emphasis on the costs of stricter pollution control. Nearly all economic activity caused some pollution of the environment - the question was whether the degree of pollution was actually harmful. For this reason, the concept of "Best Available Technology" as a basis for the setting of international standards was both damaging and expensive. We were right to take advantage of our climate and topography. Accordingly, we should maintain our preference for "Environmental Quality Objectives", and for the concept of "Best Practical Means" which had been part of British law for a long time.

It was also argued, however, that we should not discount the possibility of alternative approaches in some areas where they were supported by a strong body of international opinion. The North Sea and acid rain might be examples.

Differing views were expressed on the merits of public disclosure, particularly in relation to the nuclear industry. On the one hand, it was important to keep the confidence of the industry, and avoid fuelling exaggerated fears. On the other hand, as the Royal Commission had pointed out, any unnecessary secrecy could cause acute political difficulty, if, for example, an incident occurred. Reference was made to the fate of the American nuclear industry, which had been virtually killed off by excessive environmental controls. Those who argued against nuclear power in this country believed that fossil fuels could take the place of nuclear power generation. But attention would then concentrate still more on acid rain. Counter measures were possible, but could cost in the region of £50 million per power station.

Initial consideration was given to the summary of points for Ministers at the end of the Official Report. Although firm decisions were not reached, there was support for the general policy stance set out in paragraph 51a with the qualification that the importance of cost considerations might be brought out further. The recommendations on research (paragraph 51b) should refer not only to the priority given to environmental pollution research, but also to the need for better direction of funds already available. On acid deposition (paragraph 51g) it was agreed to await the further report from officials. On vehicle emissions (paragraph 51h) it was agreed that the United Kingdom should maintain vigorously its preference for "lean burn" as opposed to catalytic convertors as a route to the reduction of nitrogen oxide emissions. On radio-active waste (paragraph 51i) it was noted that the Secretary of State for the Environment was considering the adequacy of the proposed inquiry procedures for the disposal of waste on land. The situation at Sellafield was judged to be under control, although the disadvantages of an ageing plant were becoming increasingly obvious. On pollution at sea (paragraph 51j) the meeting noted with satisfaction that the United Kingdom had secured agreement to its view that discussions at the forthcoming conference should be based on firm scientific evidence. On agriculture and the environment (paragraph 51k) no conclusion was reached, although concern was expressed on the one hand about the costs of the Wild Life and Countryside Act, 1981, and on the other about the dangers of interfering with a new financial mechanism at such a sensitive time.

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that a further meeting would be necessary in about one month's time to consider further the issues covered by the Official Report. The Secretary of the Cabinet should arrange for a further paper to be circulated beforehand. Although it might not be possible to publish the Government's response to the Royal Commission's 10th Report before the end of the session, work should continue on the preparation of a statement of the Government's record on environmental pollution which could be issued before the Economic Summit.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), David Normington (Department of Employment), Callum McCarthy (Department of Trade and Industry), Michael Reidy (Department of Energy), John Graham (Scottish Office), Dinah Nichols (Department of Transport), Ivor Llewelyn (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), John Gieve (Chief Secretary's Office), Joan Dunn (Mr. Waldegrave's Office, Department of the Environment), and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

David Barclay

J. Ballard, Esq.,
Department of the Environment.