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S. P. JUDGE



02 DEC 1998

- Chancellor
- Mr Monck
- Mr R Wilson
- Mr A C S Allan
- Mr R I G Allen
- Miss Barber
- Mr Ilett
- Mr Meyrick
- Mr Monger
- Mr Perfect
- Mr Rayner
- Mr Parkinson
- Mr Lightfoot

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FROM: CHIEF SECRETARY
DATE: 3 December 1991

PRIME MINISTER

MEAT HYGIENE ENFORCEMENT

John Gummer sent me a copy of his minute to you of 4 November and the accompanying paper.

2. I understand the need for effective enforcement of the new meat hygiene standards. But John's proposal raises important questions of public expenditure and of machinery of Government which need to be carefully considered before we can reach a decision. It would involve a net public expenditure cost of around £20m over the PBS period, which is over £8m more than the cost of the local authority option. There would be a continuing running cost once the Agency was established and John does not seem to rule out the possibility of a subsidised service, which would concern me. Above all, the proposal would create an extra 1600 posts in the Civil Service. This would be contrary to our aim of reducing the size of the Service and would increase the size of MAFF by no less than 15 per cent. It is essential to discuss these alternatives, including that of leaving enforcement to local authorities, to see whether we can avoid these disadvantages. Discussions about this had been under way between my officials and John's but they had not been concluded when he sent you his minute, of which I had no warning.

3. In any further study, there are some questions which need special consideration.

4. First, would the change proposed by John lead to demands that other aspects of local food safety enforcement should also be

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transferred from local authorities to central government? Are we prepared for such further changes, or can we ring-fence the treatment of meat hygiene enforcement? Would the transfer be perceived as a loss of locally coordinated food safety enforcement?

5. Second, are there intermediate options which would give greater central control of meat hygiene enforcement, in the interests of consistency of treatment, while leaving the actual operation in local authority hands? For example the paper emphasizes the need for veterinary staff accountable to the State Veterinary Service to have more power over enforcement of standards. How far could this be achieved without the need to transfer the whole operation to the centre?

6. Thirdly, the transfer of responsibility from local authorities to central government would inevitably be disruptive, at a time when local authorities already face major changes more generally. How great would this disruption be? John says that the local authority associations oppose the transfer. Do we want a disagreement with them when we need their cooperation to carry through the other major changes?

7. Fourthly, John proposes an early statement announcing the transfer. But, in view of the need for legislation, what exactly can it say? I imagine that the business managers would not welcome an implied commitment to legislation in the first session of a new Parliament. But if the announcement cannot say when the transfer will take place, will it not look ineffective, creating uncertainty? Would such an announcement deprive the local authorities of any incentive to introduce new standards effectively and improve their performance bearing in mind that they will have to operate enforcement in the meantime?

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8. Fifthly, we need to consider the scope for contracting out under all the various options to ensure efficient delivery of the service.

9. Finally, could the loss of an arm's length relationship between MAPF and the enforcement authorities create its own problems, because of a possible perceived lack of independence from pressures by producers, or because of difficulties in resisting lobbying by interested parties?

10. I am very ready to consider these and other questions with an open mind, but I believe that it would be wrong to rush into an early announcement in favour of a central Agency before they have been properly thought through.

11. I am copying this minute to Michael Heseltine, John MacGregor, Peter Brooke, David Hunt, Kenneth Clarke, Malcolm Rifkind, Richard Ryder and Sir Robin Butler.


DAVID MELLOR