



10 DOWNING STREET

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LOBBY BRIEFING: 11AM MONDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 2002GERMAN ELECTIONS

The Prime Minister's Official Spokesman (PMOS) advised journalists that the Prime Minister had spoken to Chancellor Schroeder late last night. The Prime Minister welcomed the result of the German General Election and looked forward to continuing his very good and very close working relationship with the Chancellor. During their conversation last night, the Chancellor had said that he was keen to meet the Prime Minister in the very near future.

Asked if the Prime Minister was concerned by the anti-American views expressed during the German election campaign, the PMOS pointed to the Prime Minister's interview with a German newspaper last week in which he had acknowledged that the British and German Governments had their own positions. Nevertheless, he had had dealings with Chancellor Schroeder on important international matters in the past and had always valued their relationship, for instance with regard to issues such as Afghanistan and Macedonia where the Germans had taken the lead. We would continue to engage with the German Government in the months to come. Yes, Chancellor Schroeder had raised some issues of concern during the election campaign. But it was important to recognise that people were entitled to ask sensible questions. The Prime Minister remained confident that, in the end, the international community would act together.

Questioned as to whether the Prime Minister believed that Chancellor Schroeder would see things differently in five months or if he might perhaps have used the issue to help him win the election, the PMOS said that it was for the German Government to set out its own foreign policy. It was not his job to act as a commentator on the election. The Prime Minister had always found Chancellor Schroeder to be very straightforward. He repeated that he had worked closely with him on important international issues in the past, and no doubt would continue to do so in the future.

IRAQ/DOSSIER

Asked whether Cabinet Ministers had already seen the dossier on Iraq, the PMOS said that it had been printed over the weekend so it was unlikely that they had seen a final version. Asked if that meant that some had seen a draft copy, the PMOS said that drafts would of course have been circulated around particular parts of the Government, as you would expect, such as the Foreign Office. Asked if the dossier had only been printed over the weekend because of some last minute additions we had wanted to include, the PMOS reminded journalists that, as the Prime Minister had pointed out in his Sedgefield press conference recently, we had accelerated the timescale to which we had been working to produce the dossier because, as he had acknowledged, the debate on Iraq had clearly moved on over the summer. The process of producing a public document containing intelligence material was completely different to publishing a White Paper, for example, because a lot of scrutiny and additional checking had to be undertaken to be absolutely sure that we were not compromising any of our intelligence sources.

Questioned further about the dossier, the PMOS said that it was fifty pages in length. It was a serious, sober assessment of the threat from Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction. As we had said over the weekend, it drew on intelligence material and comprehensively nailed the lie - which had been spread again by the Iraqi Foreign Minister last week - that Iraq had no such weapons. Clearly it had. The document was important because it set out as best it could the case concerning the nature of the threat - a threat which had increased, not diminished. It was important to understand the purpose of the dossier. It was asking two questions: Had the threat increased? If so, did we have to deal with it? The answer to both questions was yes. The dossier was not asking whether we would have to go to war at this point. At the moment, we were seeking a new UN Security Council Resolution which would underline to the Iraqi regime the need to fulfil their UN obligations and allow an intrusive inspections regime in order to deal with the threat from Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction and ensure that he was disarmed. The PMOS added that there was a lot of discussion taking place at the UN at the moment, and a draft Resolution was expected to be tabled in days, rather than weeks.

Asked whether individual Cabinet Ministers would be given the dossier during Cabinet today, the PMOS said he was not able to say at this stage whether the document would be ready by the time Cabinet was due to meet later this afternoon. However, the Prime Minister would go through its contents, as you would expect, and no doubt a large part of the subsequent discussion would focus on it. Asked whether the Prime Minister would invite the Cabinet to give its views as had been mentioned in the media recently, the PMOS said the idea - as characterised in one Sunday paper a while ago - that the Prime Minister would go around the table and ask for the opinion of each Minister in turn perhaps owed more to a desire to get a new line for Sunday than it did to any basis in truth. In his experience, the Prime Minister did not go around the table asking for views in quite the colourful way that had been presented. The Prime Minister would lead the discussion and the Foreign Secretary would no doubt update colleagues on the diplomatic situation. The floor would then be open for people to contribute to a debate, as was always the case in Cabinet meetings.

Asked if he would characterise today's Cabinet as a 'reporting' Cabinet, the PMOS said that it would be the first time the

Cabinet would have had the opportunity to discuss Iraq since before the summer. Over the recess, the diplomatic track, for example, had moved on. The purpose of today's meeting was to enable the Prime Minister to brief Ministers on the dossier due to be published tomorrow, in addition to giving the Cabinet an opportunity to be updated on the current situation, and allow them to express their views.

Questioned as to whether Clare Short had seen a draft copy of the document, the PMOS said that as far as he was aware, draft copies had not been widely circulated. Asked for a reaction to comments made by Ms Short and Robin Cook over the weekend regarding military action against Iraq, the PMOS acknowledged that a couple of interviews had been given by Cabinet Ministers over the course of the weekend. However, the fundamentals of this issue had not changed. As far as the Prime Minister was concerned, there were two questions: Was there a threat from Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction and did we have to deal with it? The answer to both questions was yes. That was his bottom line. Journalists had asked us about other side issues yesterday which we had dealt with at the time.

Pressed as to whether the Prime Minister agreed with Ms Short's view that the lives of Iraqis were just as precious as the lives of those who died in the Twin Towers, the PMOS said the Prime Minister believed that the Iraqi people had suffered a huge amount as a result of a brutal, dictatorial regime. That was why our pilots had been putting their lives at risk on a regular basis by patrolling the no-fly zones to protect the Kurds and Marsh Arabs. Of course no one wanted the Iraqi people to suffer. However, it was important to recognise that the threat to them and the international community came directly from Saddam Hussein himself. Asked if the Prime Minister believed that such analogies were helpful, the PMOS said the Prime Minister believed that a dossier was being published tomorrow which would set out our assessment of the threat and make the case for dealing with it. Yes, people had had given interviews over the weekend. However, our position had not changed. Questioned as to whether Ms Short would be allowed to continue to express her views as she had done in the past, the PMOS acknowledged that Ms Short had given an interview. However, the situation had not changed. Pressed as to whether we would take any action if she continued to express her particular views, the PMOS said that no one was placing any gagging orders on Ministers.

In answer to questions about the new UN Resolution, the PMOS repeated that a draft Resolution was due to be tabled shortly. Journalists would just have to exercise a little patience. Questioned as to whether we would abide by the course of action decided by the UN, the PMOS pointed out that we were going down the UN route precisely because Saddam was in breach of his obligations to the UN and the international community as a whole. As the Prime Minister had spelled out, however, the UN had to be a means of dealing with this issue. It should not be a means to endless prevarication. We were in serious discussion with our partners in the Security Council about this matter. For example, the Prime Minister and President Bush had both spoken to President Putin last week. Clearly there was a lot of diplomatic activity going on and that would continue as we sought to build as wide an international coalition as possible. As the Prime Minister had made clear many times in the past, the question was whether we should sit back - knowing that Saddam possessed these Weapons of Mass Destruction and was developing a capability - and cross our fingers, or whether we should deal with it. We were moving forward through the UN Security Council. A draft Resolution was expected within days. People had to be a little more patient.

Asked whether the Government remained 'hostile' to the idea of a substantive motion following the debate on Iraq tomorrow, the PMOS suggested that journalists were getting a little ahead of themselves. He explained that there would be a debate on the adjournment in Parliament tomorrow. There would be a full discussion focussing on all the different issues, as you would expect. There was no proposal for military action at this stage. The dossier would detail our assessment of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. At the same time, a diplomatic process inside the UN was ongoing to secure a new Security Council Resolution. It would then be up to Saddam Hussein to respond with regard to the work of UNMOVIC. Asked if the Prime Minister would agree with Robin Cook's view that Parliament should be entitled to vote before any military action against Iraq, the PMOS said that the process was going at its own pace. If/when we had to address any issues relating to military action, then we would answer such questions at the appropriate time. Asked whether the Prime Minister had received any intimation that Mr Cook or Ms Short were considering their positions, the PMOS said no.

Asked if the Prime Minister was intending to remain in the Commons for the duration of the entire debate, the PMOS said that of course the Prime Minister would want to be there for a significant amount of time. He was due to meet the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, tomorrow afternoon. Mr Howard was visiting the UK in his capacity as Chair of the Commonwealth Group of Three to discuss Zimbabwe.

In answer to questions about the type of military action that might be taken against Iraq, the PMOS said that there was an ongoing discussion in the UN Security Council as to how we could address the issue of Iraq. We wanted to ensure UNMOVIC's return to Iraq and make sure that they would be able to disarm the regime fully of its Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Prime Minister was focussing on dealing with the threat from Saddam. The fact that it had to be dealt with was not up for discussion. The 'how' was being discussed by our colleagues in the UN Security Council. Questioned as to whether the nature of a military attack on Iraq would be raised at this afternoon's Cabinet, the PMOS said that the Prime Minister was not going to set parameters on points which people might want to raise. However, it was important to remember that there was no proposal for any military action at this stage. Rather, there was an ongoing discussion which should lead to a draft Resolution being tabled within the next few days. This was all about returning UNMOVIC to Iraq and allowing them unfettered access so that they could do their job properly. Put to him that the question of 'how' to deal with Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction was a legitimate issue to discuss, the PMOS repeated that the 'how' question was being addressed through the UN. A fresh Resolution was being sought to enable UNMOVIC to return to Iraq. Whether that happened was clearly in Saddam Hussein's hands - more so than in the hands of the international community.

COUNTRYSIDE/HUNTING

Asked for a reaction to the leaking of a letter from the Prince of Wales to the Prime Minister regarding the Government's attitude to the countryside and hunting, the PMOS said that as we had underlined over the weekend, we would never brief on conversations or communications between the Prime Minister and any member of the Royal Family. The Prince of Wales was perfectly entitled to his views. The Prime Minister and the Prince had a very good relationship. Asked if we would be setting up a leak inquiry, the PMOS said no.

Questioned as to whether the Prime Minister had 'noticed' the March, the PMOS said that of course he had. Asked if he was going to do anything about the issues which had been raised, the PMOS said that the Prime Minister governed for the whole country. As such, obviously he listened to views which were democratically and peacefully expressed. That went without saying. We understood that people in the countryside had concerns - but then, so did people living in urban areas. We recognised that there were issues which were specific to the countryside, which we were currently addressing. For example, we had halted the closure of rural schools. Similarly, the closure of rural post offices had been slowed down. There were also issues regarding farming. No one was pretending that the last few years hadn't been a torrid time for farmers. They had. The Curry Commission had set out what we believed to be a more viable way forward for the industry (although, it should be pointed out that it was an industry that received £3bn worth of subsidy from the Government - which was more than all other industries in the country put together). Nevertheless, we understood there were real concerns and we would listen to what people said.

In answer to questions about hunting, the PMOS said that this was a separate issue. We had acknowledged throughout that there were very strongly held views on all sides regarding this particular matter. That was why the Government, through Alun Michael, was seeking to listen to what the different sides had to say. A series of hearings had taken place in Westminster Hall in the last few weeks. Mr Michael would continue his discussions with a view to allowing Parliament to resolve the issue. Those discussions were based on the principles, such as utility and cruelty, which he had outlined in March. That process would continue and come to a conclusion in due course.

Asked whether the Countryside March had made any difference or whether it had been a 'waste of time', the PMOS said that he had already answered the question inasmuch as he had underlined that the Prime Minister understood the concerns being expressed. As always, this was a listening Government and we would take on board the points being raised.

Asked if the Prime Minister was aware of the purpose of yesterday's March in light of Alun Michael's reported admission that he personally was not, the PMOS said that Mr Michael had been making the not unreasonable point that a large number of different issues had been raised yesterday. Asked whether Mr Michael's comments represented a Government view, the PMOS reiterated that a number of concerns had been expressed, ranging from farming, hunting and the effects of FMD, to the impact on public services in rural communities. All had coalesced under a single banner yesterday. Mr Michael's point was perfectly valid and should not be interpreted too narrowly.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Asked for a reaction to David Trimble's threat to withdraw his party from the power-sharing executive and to end its involvement in the meetings of the North South Ministerial Council if the IRA had not completely disarmed by January, the PMOS said that our view, as always, was that whilst the Good Friday Agreement might not be perfect and we might not have a perfect peace as a result of it, nevertheless it offered the best way forward in terms of having a devolved Government and ensuring a more secure future for the people of Northern Ireland. Of course that was not to say that people didn't have concerns. They had - and we would continue to listen to them. Similarly, we would continue to work with the parties to find a way forward.

Asked if the Prime Minister would be personally involved in the new round of discussions with the parties, the PMOS said that he couldn't point to anything specific at this stage. However, the Prime Minister had always devoted a considerable amount of his personal time and energy to the Good Friday Agreement at the various difficult periods which we had gone through. Obviously the issue was never far from his mind.

CBI/REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Asked for a reaction to the CBI's negative response to the Government's Regional Governance White Paper, the PMOS said that the CBI was perfectly entitled to set out its views - as were all manner of other groups. Indeed, the Government actively sought them. That was part and parcel of a vibrant democratic process.

LINKS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Previous Lobby notes

Back to Newsroom