Cabinet conclusions on the issue of German unity based on a memorandum of 3 May 1946 by Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, E. Bevin, dated 7 May 1946

TOP SECRET

C.M. (46) 43rd Conclusions, Minute 1

Confidential Annex

7 May, 1946

The Cabinet had a preliminary exchange of views on a memorandum by the Foreign Secretary (C.P. (46) 186[[1]](#footnote-1)) on future policy towards Germany.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that this memorandum posed the alternatives of continuing to work towards a unified (though federalised) Germany or seeking to promote the formation of a Western German State of States which would be a bulwark against the spread of Communist influence from the east. He did not at this stage seek final conclusions, but he wished to have a preliminary exchange of views with his Cabinet colleagues before these issues were discussed with the Dominion Ministers. His own view was that, both on general grounds and because we had not the resources necessary to organise the British zone of Germany as a stable separate unit, the Foreign Secretary was right in suggesting that the general dangers of splitting Germany were greater than those of continuing our present policy and that we might hope to avoid the dangers of excessive centralisation by encouraging political development along federal lines. He had recently received from the Deputy Military Governor of the Control Commission[[2]](#footnote-2) an appreciation, dated 5th May, of the effect of a further reduction or cessation of imports of food grains into the British zone[[3]](#footnote-3). This appreciation (which was read to the Cabinet) showed the magnitude of the problems confronting our administration in Germany, and afforded a striking illustration of the economic and political difficulties with which we should be faced if we attempted now to build up Western Germany as a separate unit.

THE LORD PRESIDENT[[4]](#footnote-4) said that our acceptance of the conclusions of the Berlin Conference had put us in a very weak position. He believed that, as time went on, it would be generally recognised that the Berlin conclusions regarding Germany had been unsound. Meanwhile, the Russians were maintaining their zone as a closed area and denying to Western Germany a fair share of the food from the east; and the execution of the agreed policy for reparations and for the reduction of the level of Germany industry, coupled with the inevitable food shortages, was creating conditions in our zones for which the blame was being laid at our door. He was in general agreement with the Foreign Secretary’s view that that we should continue to work towards a unified Germany, though there should be a much greater degree of decentralisation than in the past. He felt strongly, however, that in pursuing any such policy we must, while seeking to preserve good relations with the Russians, point out to them firmly and publicly the consequences of their policy. It was time that the Germans themselves and our other partners in the occupation of Germany should clearly understand where the fault lay. At the same time, we should adopt a more positive and progressive socialist policy in our zone, in both economic and social matters, so that the democratic forces in Germany should be encouraged and that we should stand out as the natural leaders of progressive democracy. He did not accept the view that a clash with Russia was inevitable and he felt that it would be possible for us, while recognising the dangers inherent in the present Russian policy and developing a livelier leadership in Europe, to keep the way clear for the re-establishment of more harmonious relations with the Soviet Union.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER[[5]](#footnote-5) said that he was concerned about the present position in Germany. Both politically and economically we seemed to be getting the worst of both worlds. He believed that our financial liabilities might even be increased if the policy of a unified Germany were adopted, and he felt that this aspect of the matter would have to be considered before a final decision was reached[[6]](#footnote-6). Apart from this, the arguments set out in paragraph 10 of C.P.(46)186 in favour of working towards a unified Germany seemed to him conclusive. He was strongly of opinion that we should avoid drifting into an anti-Soviet policy. He did not agree with the statement in paragraph 2 of C.P.(46)186 that “the danger of Russia had become certainly as great as, and possibly even greater than, that of a revived Germany”; though he agreed with the statement in the following sentence that “the worst situation of all would be a revived Germany in league with or dominated by Russia”. He hoped that any scheme for a unified Germany would provide for a large measure of decentralisation to Provincial Governments and for the establishment of the Ruhr as a separate province[[7]](#footnote-7) in which the industries would be owned by an international consortium.

THE MINISTER OF HEALTH[[8]](#footnote-8) said that the scheme favoured by the Foreign Secretary seemed to be based on the grant of considerable autonomous powers to the provinces, with a general tendency to restrict the powers of the centre to the barest minimum necessary for its coordinating function. A constitution imposed by the victorious Powers would be unpopular; and it was mistaken to suppose that we could establish and maintain a Federal system in Germany against the will of the German people. The fears expressed in C.P.(46)186 with regard to Russia seemed to be exaggerated and insufficient recognition had been given to the fact that the influence of Russia inevitably weakened as it penetrated further to the west. He agreed with the Lord President that we should adopt a more positive and progressive policy in Germany and should back this up with suitable publicity. Above all, it should be recognised that in the end the German people would evolve their own political structure and that any attempt to impose on them conditions alien to their natural development would fail.

THE LORD CHANCELLOR[[9]](#footnote-9) said that, while he recognised the force of the arguments advanced by the Minister of Health, he was in general agreement with the conclusions reached in the Foreign Secretary’s memorandum. It was impossible in present conditions to determine our final policy. For the moment we must temporise. He agreed, however, that more vigorous steps should be taken to publicise the British case.

THE MINISTER OF FUEL AND POWER[[10]](#footnote-10) said that it was difficult to reconcile our two main aims of preventing the revival of Germany as a military power and encouraging the growth of a vigorous democratic system in Germany. There would also be some difficulty in reconciling a federal political system with a unified economic system. On balance, however, he saw no alternative to the line suggested by the Foreign Secretary, short of abandoning our zone in Germany. Russian interests in other parts of the world would probably limit their penetration into western Europe.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR[[11]](#footnote-11) said that if the proposal for a unified though federalised Germany were accepted as our aim, we should have a stronger case to put to the world. Though it was attractive to contemplate the early withdrawal of British troops from Germany[[12]](#footnote-12), he himself believed that we should have to maintain an Army of occupation there for some years if we were to maintain conditions favourable to the establishment of a strong, social democracy in Germany.

THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS[[13]](#footnote-13) pointed out that any apparent inconsistencies in the policy suggested in C.P.(46)186 were due to the need to steer a course among the conflicting aims and policies in Germany. Thus, the French had always opposed political unification, while the Russians were in practice failing to carry out the agreement for economic unification. He did not believe that publicising our case would suffice to remedy this situation unless we could secure more satisfactory economic conditions, and he attached great importance to our insisting that Russia should treat Germany as an economic unit. In the last resort, we might for this purpose have to suspend the operations for reducing the level of German industry in our zone which we had undertaken in accordance with the Berlin Agreement. With regard to the point made by the Minister of Health, he was sure that the Foreign Secretary had no intention of seeking to impose a constitution on Germany against the will of the German people.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER[[14]](#footnote-14) said that he was in general agreement with the Foreign Secretary’s suggestion, provided that in carrying out any scheme of unification account was taken of the views of the German people themselves. He thought it important, however, to avoid any scheme under which the central administration would consist of purely coordinating bodies without effective control, or the separate provinces would remain under the control of the separate Zone Commanders, since in either case there could be no prospect of building up an effective central administration.

[TNA, CAB 128/7]

Keywords: post-war Germany, inter-allied relations

1. See Bevin’s memorandum of 3 May 1946. The discussion which follows below took place without Bevin who had been sent to a session of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Paris. The British historian A. Deighton has characterised the discussion as ‘acrimonious’ (Deighton A. Towards a ‘Western’ Strategy. p. 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robertson, Brian Hubert (1896 – 1974) – British General. Deputy Military Governor (1945 – 1947), Military Governor (1947 – 1950) of the British zone of occupation in Germany, Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Land Forces and Governor of the Suez Canal Zone (1950 – 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Earlier, Robertson articulated similar information at meetings of the Control Council as well. On 28 February, as Semenov observed in an informative letter of 9 March, Robertson ‘officially declared that in the British zone, due to inadequate food supplies, provisioning norms for the population were being reduced. For a range of basic foodstuffs (bread, meat, etc.) the ration had been almost halved. All this has raised a stir of suspicion in the British press.’ (SSSR i germanskii vopros. Т. 2. S. 384). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Morrison, Herbert Stanley (1888 – 1965) – British statesman and politician (Labour). Home Secretary (1940 – 1945), Lord President of the Council and Deputy Prime Minister (1945 – 1951), Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dalton, Hugh (1887 – 1962) – British statesman and politician (Labour), President of the Board of Trade (1942 – 1945), Chancellor of the Exchequer (1945 – 1947), Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1948 – 1950), Minister of Local Government and Planning (1950 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dalton returned to the discussion of this issue at a meeting of the Cabinet on 21 October, having indicated that losses in the British Zone of Occupation in 1946-1947 amounted to £120 million, ‘which was the equivalent of 1s. in the £ on the income tax’ (C.M. (46) th Conclusions, 21/10/1946 // TNA, CAB 128/6). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It was not only Dalton who shared such a view. ‘By April, Bevin was persuaded by his officials, in particular by Sargent and Hall-Patch, that a new large province should be established for the Ruhr region, although the Russians were not to be told about this until after the Paris Council.’ (Deighton A. Towards a ‘Western’ Strategy. p. 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bevan, Aneurin (1897 – 1960) – British statesman and politician (Labour). Minister of Health (1945 – 1951), Minister of Labour and National Service (1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jowitt, William Allen (1885 – 1957) – British statesman and politician (Labour). Minister of National Insurance (1944 – 1945), Lord Chancellor (1945 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shinwell, Emanuel (1884 – 1986) – British statesman and politician (Labour), Minister of Fuel and Power (1945 – 1947), Secretary of State for War (1947 – 1950), Minister for Defence (1950 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lawson, John James (1881 – 1965) – British statesman and politician (Labour), Secretary of State for War (1945 – 1946), Lord Lieutenant of Durham (1949 – 1958). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Back in the period of planning measures in respect of Germany in September 1944, British military planners had tried to reduce the size of the force set aside for the requirements of the occupation to allow for their deployment to other regions, including the Near-East. See: Copy of A.P.W. (44) 14th Meeting (in: C.O.S. (44) 804 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/87. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. McNeil, Hector (1907 – 1955) – British statesman and politician (Labour). Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1945 – 1946), Minister of State at the Foreign Office (1946 – 1950), Secretary of State for Scotland (1950 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hynd, John Burns (1902 – 1971) – British statesman and politician (Labour). Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for Germany and Austria (1945 – 1947), Minister of Pensions (1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)