

PARLIAMENTARY  
AFFAIRS

HOME AFFAIRS

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Council Tax

1. The Cabinet were informed of the business to be taken in the House of Commons and the House of Lords in the following week.

2. THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT said that information now available on the level of council tax for 1994/95 showed that the average band C tax in areas with a Conservative council, at £430, was £129 lower than the average for Labour areas (compared with £108 in 1993/94) and £73 lower than the average for Liberal Democrat areas. It would be helpful to emphasise these figures in making the point that Labour was a party of high taxation.

In a brief discussion, it was noted that the figures might be distorted by county councils which were using up their reserves in the expectation that they would be abolished. When this was taken into account, the difference between the average tax figures for Conservative and Labour controlled councils might be even more significant.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up a brief discussion, said that every effort should be made to draw attention to the significance of the figures which the Secretary of State had mentioned.

The Cabinet

1. Took note.

Mortar Attack  
on Heathrow  
Airport

THE HOME SECRETARY said that a mortar attack had been carried out on Heathrow airport on the previous evening. Six coded messages had been telephoned to various media organisations between 5.06 and 5.17 pm, saying that a number of bombs would explode at Heathrow in the next hour and that all terminals should be cleared and flights stopped. Agreed search procedures had immediately been put into operation, and a complete sweep of the terminals and runways had been completed by 5.57 pm, when reports were received of a major fire in a car park outside the airport complex. The cause of the fire was not immediately clear, but when eye-witness reports suggested that mortars might have been involved, the police gave advice, at 6.35 pm, that the northern runway should be closed. No planes had used the runway



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after 6.40 pm, and four unexploded mortars had subsequently been found. The runway had not been damaged and was expected to re-open in the course of the morning. It had been necessary to divert only 5 flights to Gatwick airport, although there had been delays to flights which continued to operate from Heathrow. The mortars used had been ten times less powerful than those involved in the attack on Downing Street in 1991, but would nevertheless have caused grave damage if they had exploded on impact with an aircraft. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner would shortly be providing a full report on the incident, and it was important that any lessons to be learnt should be identified and acted on. However, it was clearly difficult to remove all possibility of such attacks.

In discussion the following main points were made:

a. the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was meeting the Irish Foreign Minister, Mr Dick Spring, later that day. He would propose that they should agree that any group which had authorised, permitted or justified such an attack could not be seriously interested in the clarification of the joint declaration agreed by the British and Irish Governments in December. If Sinn Fein were not concerned about stopping violence the constitutional talks process would take place without them;

b. the Secretary of State for Transport had called for a report on any implications of the attack for internal security at Heathrow airport;

c. it would be useful to identify whether any aircraft operated by United States airlines or Aer Lingus had been in the vicinity of the attack. On the other hand drawing attention to risks to aircraft used by United States passengers could put off prospective investors and other visitors to the United Kingdom;

d. elements of a previous Cabinet discussion about Northern Ireland had subsequently been reported in the press. It was essential that such discussions remained confidential.

The Cabinet -

2. Took note.

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