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MR. WHITTINGDALE

cc Mr. Ingham

THE COMMUNITY CHARGE

Following exchanges earlier in the spring, the Prime Minister has accepted Nick Ridley's plans for the "non-political" publicity for the community charge. Bernard was involved in these earlier exchanges.

Nick Ridley has now sent this further minute of 12 April (attached) concerning proposals for getting the message across at a political level. Can I suggest that it might be more appropriate for you to take the lead in handling this piece of paper, consulting Bernard as appropriate?

PAUL GRAY

12 April 1989

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Prime Minister

THE COMMUNITY CHARGE

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I promised in my minute of 22 March to let you have a note on my proposals for getting across our message on the community charge at a political level between now and April 1990 when the first bills will be paid.

The first step in this process will be the local election campaign. Labour launched their campaign on Tuesday 11 April; we launched ours today. Clearly the community charge will be a major issue and it is in our interests that it should be. The main points we want to make are:

- Every political party favours scrapping the existing rating system;
- The community charge is the fairest alternative with everyone paying their fair share and generous rebates for those who need them;
- The Opposition Party's alternatives would be a disaster. There is no doubt that both a full blown local income tax and still more Labour's two tax alternative are wide open to attack;
- County Council spending represents about four fifths of all local spending so our message is: 'Vote Conservative this May for a reasonable Community Charge over the next few years. Vote for the other Parties and pay through the nose'.

These messages need to be got across at every level of the Party:

- County Council election briefing meetings have been held all over the country with our County Council candidates being briefed by DOE Ministers on the community charge and other subjects: education, water privatisation, housing and planning. Each County Conservative Group has appointed a community charge specialist who is receiving additional briefing and assistance from the Conservative Research Department to enable them to put across our case as effectively as possible at local level. Central Office have also sent briefing material to candidates, as well as leaflets for distribution by constituencies. Draft letters for local papers are also being sent out to constituencies covering both the community charge and the Opposition alternatives. Ministers are personally ringing up constituency agents to encourage them to ensure that they are sent out to their local newspapers;

- Colleagues will very shortly be sent briefing setting out the key points to get across on the community charge and enclosing a fact card with the main points on the community charge on one side and on the other their local figures for the community charge and the Opposition alternatives; and

- DOE Ministers are fully involved in attending local campaign meetings with the aim of getting good local coverage of our proposals. The Press Conference on the 12th and other media opportunities will also be used for this purpose. [Clearly we will also be highlighting the disastrous record of both the Democrats and Labour in County Halls. Indeed Central Office are publishing a pamphlet about this later this week]. It will also be necessary to nail Labour lies about the community charge put about locally as quickly as possible. For that purpose Central Office are arranging for us to receive copies of Opposition literature as it comes out. One of the main lies is the attempt to pretend that everyone will pay the same, regardless of income. We will be particularly stressing to MPs and constituencies that about 9 1/2 million adults - or over one in four - will receive rebates.

Over the twelve months between the 1989 and 1990 local elections there will be three periods in which the community charge will receive a great deal of attention.

The first is the period for community charge registration which begins on 22 May - after the County elections. This was the latest possible date for beginning preparations without running the risk of councils being unable to complete the process and blaming the Government for the resultant fiasco. The key requirement is that Ministers and colleagues should be active in getting local coverage for our case. To that end I propose:

- a nationwide tour by DOE Ministers setting out the case for the community charge in the period after the Local Government and Housing Bill finishes its committee stage and before the European elections on 15 June; and

- sending colleagues briefing material including a draft article for local papers, and other useful material.

The second period will be in the Autumn when we will be maximising our drive for registration for rebates. It is vital that we get as high a take-up as early as possible so that net bills are sent out and fears of large bills by poor people can be dispelled. Effective government paid publicity will clearly be vital. We will also be seeking with the help of colleagues to get across the very significant help available for low income households and the fact that this makes our new system a really fair one. The Party Conference will be a very useful starting point; a good debate with plenty of literature available and a well organised fringe meeting are all essential.

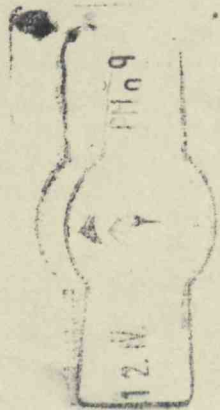
Next Spring will clearly be the crunch period as bills are fixed and sent out. We will have published our estimates for local community charges and will need to make it crystal clear that charges above those levels are largely the responsibility of extravagant councils. The fact of the community charge must not be the issue - we want to turn people's attention to the level of the charge. High charges must be firmly pinned on Labour and the Democrats, not on the Government. We will be helped by being able to compare lower levels of charge in neighbouring Tory areas - at least in some cases. We will also need to stress the impact of the alternatives in different parts of the country. This will clearly require a massive political selling effort at every level of the Party. I will be in touch with Peter Brooke in the near future to discuss ideas for such a campaign in the near future. It will need considerable forward planning and will inevitably mean some call on Party resources. I appreciate that Central Office have many other claims on resources but I feel sure that this operation should have a high priority. It is absolutely vital that this campaign is successful and I am entirely confident that it will be.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be a stylized 'R' or 'K' with a long, sweeping tail that curves under and back up.

NR

12 April 1989

LOCAL GOVT: Pating Pt 12



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