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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Alexander Fleming House, Elephant & Castle, London SE1 6BY

Telephone 01-407 5522 ext: GRO-C

From the Permanent Secretary

Sir Kenneth Stowe GCB CVO

Sir Robert Armstrong GCB CVO
Cabinet office
70 Whitehall
SW1A 2AS

SECOND SEC'S OFFICE (PUBLIC SECT)	
ACTION	Ms. Boys
COPIES TO	MR. ANSON MRS. PEIRSON

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by Sec. R. St.

AIDS

We discussed on Friday evening the issues that lie behind the troubled minute to me from Sir Donald Acheson of 3 October - copy at Annex - and concluded that it would be desirable for you to brief the Prime Minister for next weekend, with advice on how we should proceed.

We have some interdepartmental machinery in place to deal with AIDS - an Official Committee chaired by Strachan Heppell reporting to a Ministerial Committee at Minister of State level chaired by the Minister for Health, now Tony Newton. But this has not been able to secure as yet either acceptance of a sufficiently comprehensive analysis of the U.K. problem or the necessary commitment to urgent action, especially in the field of public education.

The analysis must inevitably raise difficult and controversial issues for Ministers. Without attempting to be comprehensive, one can instance:

- (a) How best can the general population be re-assured, as they need to be?
- (b) Can this be done without provoking or condoning some kind of moral crusade against eg sexual promiscuity, prostitution, homosexuality?
- (c) Assuming that can be avoided, how far can Government go in advising and assisting promiscuous homosexuals and/or drug addicts on the techniques they should avoid/practise to reduce the risks they are exposed to?
- (d) What guidance is to be given in schools to each year's crop of sexually active adolescents (very much bound up with sex education)?

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(e) What action (if any) is to be taken with regard to injecting-drug-addicts to provide a supply of clean needles - the issue raised with the Scottish Office by their Committee?

(f) What is to be the policy among large-scale employers like the Armed Forces and government to screen their recruits before they commit themselves to a liability for sickness, death and widows benefits for the Aids-infected? The U.S. Armed Forces, for example, now do it: 1 in 600 recruits are currently found to be infected, so I am told. Should we? If not, is the liability to be written out of the contract of employment or tacitly accepted?

(g) What of the Life Offices? Can they be persuaded to continue to accept the risk without medical checks on those seeking life assurance policies; if not, what responsibility do they carry - or will accept - for those they discover to be infected?

(h) Is it relevant or practical to impose health checks on those entering the U.K. from those parts of the world where the disease is most common?

These are all issues that are either foreseeable or have already arisen. Others may well emerge. Ministers, and MPs, are very edgy about some of them, understandably so. Nevertheless, as Donald's minute indicates, the U.K. is at present only on the threshold of a large-scale social disaster and it is just possible, though not certain, that effective but speedy action with regard to the groups most at risk will substantially confine it to those groups. The disease is already "leaking" into the general population but (it is believed) only on a very small scale. We cannot be confident that it will continue thus. So the case is urgent.

My own judgement - after observing Ministers walking round these matters for nearly a year, now - is that we must aim to establish publicly a clear recognition by the Government, with the support of all parties, that we have a crisis to deal with; that the only response is public education resulting in behavioural change; and that some kind of authoritative public body is needed to devise and direct that response, funded by Government, but given the freedom and resources (from our budget) to speak plainly and be visibly active. If we can agree on that, and the Prime Minister could be so advised, we might make progress. It would perhaps be helpful if you convened a meeting of the relevant Permanent Secretaries, including of course Donald Acheson, to consider this.

I am copying this initially to Kerr Fraser, Richard Lloyd Jones, Robert Andrew, Brian Cubbon, David Hancock, Robin Butler and Patrick Wright.

Yours ever.

GRO-C