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Setting the Stage: *In Place of Strife*

The manoeuvring that Callaghan had done on the industrial relations front while the Prime Minister had been away prompted Harold Wilson to do what many felt he should have done months earlier. Within hours of his return from Addis Ababa on Wednesday, 2 April 1969, the Prime Minister began secretly to put the wheels in motion for an abbreviated and, what his closest advisers had hoped would be, a more marketable version of *In Place of Strife*;\(^1\) in other words, legislation that could make its way through Parliament far quicker than the original bill. On the advice of Barbara Castle and Roy Jenkins, he agreed to set aside the detailed White Paper that had triggered so much controversy in the National Executive and, instead, offer up an interim bill that could be included in the Chancellor’s budget, the details of which were to be delivered to Cabinet in less than two weeks.

The short bill, for enactment before the summer recess, retained that part of the original proposal that gave the government the ability to step into a labour dispute and order a four-week cooling-off period. But it put off to future legislation the equally contentious requirement that called for trade unions to ballot their workers before ordering a strike. It kept in place the idea of levying “financial penalties” against workers who illegally stayed off the job, but “categorically ruled out” jailing anyone who refused to pay. In addition, the short bill put the whole matter of levying the penalties, which were no longer to be referred to as “fines”,

\(^1\) Labour History Archive (Manchester), Heffer ESH/3/4. The Labour MP Eric Heffer’s handwritten comments on a copy of the original White Paper reflected the feelings of a significant segment of the Parliamentary Labour Party: “The soft sell for a hard deal. 80% acceptable – possibly more, but rest spoil the possible achievement…”
in the hands of an industrial board with representatives from both the government and the trade unions. While this was to be presented as a further softening of the government’s stance, the door remained open to the possibility that the civil courts might step in and order the seizure of a worker’s personal belongings if he or she refused to pay.

The fast-track approach that Wilson embraced within hours of his return from his African peace mission was not far removed from the earlier whimsical ideas of two of his closest political advisers, Gerald Kaufman and Joe Haines. Kaufman, having been with Wilson in Africa, experienced first-hand the Prime Minister’s frustration at having been so distant from the developing political crisis; Haines, meanwhile, had used his contacts with the news media to try and calculate the political damage inflicted upon the government by Callaghan’s intrigues. But six years earlier, they had been a pair of young comedy writers for That Was The Week That Was, the popular political satire programme on BBC TV. Then they had written a routine about the ushering into the Commons of the first vending machines for food and beverages and asked, Why stop there? Why not have vending machines at Westminster that can turn out “instant” government policies? In that skit, Kaufman and Haines had aptly noted that sometimes “MPs need a policy in a hurry” and, oddly enough, in early April 1969 that was exactly the position that Wilson found himself in.

The sense of urgency explained why Castle and Jenkins had several meetings while the Prime Minister had been in Africa, including a private lunch at No. 11 Downing Street on Friday, 28 March, just two days after Callaghan’s vote at the National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting. By the following Monday, Castle and her advisers had begun to cobble together the short bill with the idea being that the remainder of the proposals in the White Paper would be addressed after the next general election. The next day, Tuesday, the Chancellor, leaving little

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2 PRO, CAB 128/44 Part I. Minutes from Cabinet meeting of 14 April 1969.
3 Sun, 17 April 1969, p. 1.
5 PRO, LAB 77/15. Castle’s ministerial appointments diary, 28 March 1969. The entry for that day indicates the urgency of the meeting. It appears the First Secretary had cancelled an earlier luncheon date with an unnamed individual at Escargot in London to meet with the Chancellor.
6 PRO, LAB 77/15. Castle’s ministerial appointments diary, 31 March 1969. Castle met on the interim bill with Roy Hattersley, her parliamentary private secretary, and several officials from her department.