

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Interview with Mr. W. G. M. Olivier

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for the DEA History Project

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SUBJECT: AUSTERITY 1969

Olivier first became certain that lay-offs would happen after he heard the prime minister's speech on August 13, 1969. Olivier emphasized that the decision to save money through lay-offs was made at the senior levels and there was no consultation with officials at the operational level (Olivier was Director of Personnel Operations Division). Consequently, senior management had no idea what the practical implications of their policy would be. He added that he felt that given more time and a voice in the policy-making, lay-offs, or at least the majority of them, could have been avoided. Olivier sent up the recommendations for officers to sit on the committees deliberating on the FSO's and F.M. Tovell arranged the others for the AS and support categories. He himself served on three of the four committees. Olivier confirmed that External Affairs had painted itself into a corner by threatening the government with lay-offs and post closings, only to have the bluff called.

He emphasized how busy his operation was with just the routine work and the massive amount of time needing to be devoted to the committee work. This confirms the atmosphere of reaction and response reflected in the documentary evidence where rational planning seems to have been forgotten or at least put in abeyance. The committees did a complete review of all assessments going back over a number of years. An average of point ratings was taken. Some employees were barely considered at all because

their work and character were known to be of such high calibre. The reverse is also true. Others merited little reflection because of the poor quality of their work or character and were quickly added to the list. It is at this point that Olivier confirmed that some decisions were subjective. Also evaluations were almost always inflated which made the selection process difficult. Olivier said that the more militant types on the committee were counter-balanced by those who bent over backwards to be not only fair but lenient. Olivier called it a "fascinating, grim exercise" to have a person's whole career in front of you which according to the decision taken would end or continue. He emphasized that there was no arbitrariness to the decisions. Long painful hours were spent carefully weighing all pertinent factors. Olivier confirmed that security was a significant factor in some cases but was not the deciding factor unless the character weakness was blatant. The participation by E. R. Rettie, Head of Security and Intelligence, was to ensure the security aspect was included in the deliberations. Again Olivier emphasized the leniency of some of the committee members which helped keep character defects among the personnel from becoming a major factor. Olivier was the one who had to discuss the decision with the redundant employees if they wanted a hearing. These were painful, difficult sessions especially when Olivier had to go through this with good friends or weeping wives. One tragic situation involved G. H. Hampson, whose house burnt down one night and the next day he received his letter advising him he was to be laid off. He was well-off financially however. Olivier was particularly annoyed at management who directed him to confront senior officials, at a higher grade

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than Olivier, with the bad news because they were reluctant to do the dirty work themselves. The junior officers were very apprehensive around this time because they were afraid the last-in, first-out approach might be used.

Some were advised before the letter was sent particularly those over sixty years of age while others found out only when the letter arrived. The letter was cold, part of the blame for which must rest with Olivier because he helped draft it. Everyone was invited to discuss the situation.

The unions were ineffectual. PAFSO was criticized because of the little it did. None of the unions, however, had any significant impact nor did they ever force a reversal of any of the policies laid down in the manpower adjustment program.

Concerning the Roy/Seaborn disagreement about the lay-offs, Olivier said the lay-offs were by then, irrevocable. The reduction in staff became irreversible back when Cabinet had called the department's bluff. An exercise had begun which, although distasteful, presented an opportunity to remove some of the dead-wood in the department. Roy's suggested reversal of policy was not feasible. Olivier said Roy's opposition to the policy had no bearing on [REDACTED]

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Olivier felt that it would be unfair to say personal scores were settled. The innuendo relating to vendettas was understandable given human nature. The austerity program was not handled well, however, in that everything was rush-rush-rush. Olivier felt that, had more thought been given to the situation,

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had the heads of post and heads of division been consulted, had personnel been looked at in its totality and had there been more time to find job openings, the process would have been far less painful and most of the human misery could have been avoided.

Olivier did not feel the department suffered discrimination. He said there was some jealousy and that we had some snotty-nosed people who, by their attitude, engendered antipathy. Our own poor administration was also a factor. He pointed to the problem of recruiting political analysts and then expecting them to be instant administrators and rating them on their administrative expertise. We had a tradition of having ministers who were not able or inclined to get involved with the machinery of the department. Olivier singled out A.E. Ritchie as a concerned Under-secretary who worked hard to keep to a minimum the damage the department was suffering. On whether the government would have accepted a reduction package excluding lay-offs or not, Olivier thought not because of the political hay to be made but he said his opinion was just speculation.

The austerity measures helped strengthen the unions who took on a larger more militant role. If there was a drop in departmental efficiency, it was because the department did not possess the efficiency required for the new circumstances. Inter-divisional rivalry was not exacerbated during this period, in fact it submerged somewhat before the general feeling that everyone needed to pull together to get through the difficult period. Olivier felt the disruption caused by the austerity measures at the posts was not very great, some posts were overstaffed anyway. Olivier said also that the proposed Manpower Coordinating Committee was never set up.

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Olivier advised that a study of this period should stress the effect on morale, the pain of releasing long-time friends and colleagues and the disruptive effect on the people abroad. The special boards and the problem of consistent non-critical evaluations by raters merited discussion as well. At the conclusion of the interview Olivier emphasized that the lay-offs represented a consequence of policy and were not a deliberate policy in themselves.

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