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CONFIDENTIAL FILING

Presence of Ministers in the  
House of Commons

MINISTERS

April 1990.

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
18.4.90.							

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10 DOWNING STREET

Pure Minister

Following your recent discussion  
with the Chief Whip you agreed  
to say a few words at Cabinet  
(a "political" comment at best?)  
about maintain a presence  
in the House and keeping  
back benches informed. Your  
record on this is excellent.

The attached note sets out  
the practical suggestions you  
might mention.

BT

18/4

mf





Government Chief Whip  
12 Downing Street, London SW1A 2AA

→ Poloff

11 April 1990

PRIME MINISTER

PRESENCE OF MINISTERS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

When we talked on April 5, I suggested that it would be helpful if you spoke to colleagues after Cabinet asking them and their junior ministers to spend more time in the House of Commons from now until the Summer Recess. This is particularly important, given that we are likely to have three more difficult months in the House with "edgy" backbenchers and a number of hot late nights.

The particular points that I think worth mentioning are as follows:-

- 1) Quite apart from their appearances to make a speech or to answer questions in the Chamber, Ministers should be in the "social rooms" of the House regularly, with time to spare to talk to backbenchers. Lunch or dinner in the House once a week, plus Prime Minister's Questions followed by the tea-room once a week, should be an achievable basic pattern. Private offices should ensure that the diary allows for this.
- 2) Consultation either with the officers of backbench committees or with groups of interested backbenchers should be increased. The aim is to discuss and involve backbenchers in the problems and policy decisions that lie immediately ahead. (This is a form of prelude to setting up policy groups for our strategy for the 1990s in which MPs should in due course be involved). The aim, of course, is to make backbenchers feel that they are being sounded out about policy proposals. This requires some planning and an active PPS. When colleagues feel they have been consulted, they are more likely to support Ministers in difficult times.
- 3) If there is a regional problem or policy proposal coming out, Ministers should involve interested MPs from that region in their discussion. They may consider asking such MPs to visit local firms or polytechnics to get their ideas and reactions to the proposals that are being informally talked about.

/continued over.....

4) Ministers should always let backbench colleagues know when they are about to send them either good news or bad news. If good news, this enables MPs to prepare press releases and news items for the local media. If bad, it enables the MP to roll the pitch in advance so that the ground is prepared and the information should then be released on the best day and in the most acceptable terms possible.

The Whips should be able to advise Ministers on which backbenchers have local difficulties about particular issues.

5) In order to make more time available for discussion and consultation in the House, it may be necessary for Ministers to cut down on their amount of travel outside London.

I appreciate that what I have written borders on the obvious and that some Ministers are already extremely good at being involved with colleagues in the House and in using their PPS for this purpose, others much less so. But I do think it worth stressing that it is often much cosier and easier for a Minister to be in his room in his Department in the evening rather than facing the turmoil of the tea-room and some hostile questioning from our backbenchers. Yet Ministers badly need to be seen more in the House and our backbenchers need to feel that they are sharing their problems and future policy ideas with them in frank discussion.

Tim Benton





# Grey Scale #13



**A** 1 2 3 4 5 6 **M** 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 **B** 17 18 19



Inches 1 2 3  
Centimetres 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

## Colour Chart #13

Blue Cyan Green Yellow

