

E.R.  
4.  
PRIME MINISTER

Following your discussion with Sir John Hunt about the traditional secrecy of Cabinet Committees, he now proposes in the attached submission that you should announce the decision you have taken in response to an oral Question from Mr. Mike Thomas (which will in fact not be reached) on Thursday of this week.

Sir John's attached submission also suggests that you should warn your colleagues of this announcement, and he includes at Flag B a draft speaking note which you might use at Cabinet on Thursday. Alternatively, would you prefer Ken Stowe to write around to all Cabinet Ministers' Private Offices once you have approved the Answer, thus saving one small item of business from Thursday's Cabinet agenda?

22 May 1979

MPD  
I will do it  
at lunchtime  
ms



Ref. A09607

MR. PATTISON

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Revelation of Cabinet Committees

The Prime Minister, as you know, discussed my minute A09515 with me on 17th May and decided that she would announce the main Standing Committees of the Cabinet, with the names of their chairmen, but would refuse to be drawn any further. The corollary of this is that if it becomes necessary to set up any further Ministerial Committees they should be established as a Sub-Committee of one of the main Standing Committees.

The Prime Minister has an oral Question from Mr. Mike Thomas (which will not however be reached) on Thursday of this week: and I attach at flag A a draft reply which I think reflects the Prime Minister's wishes.

I think the Prime Minister ought to warn her colleagues of this innovation and of where she proposes to draw the line in future. Otherwise there may be some misunderstanding. Accordingly I attach at flag B a draft speaking note which the Prime Minister might care to use under the Parliamentary Affairs item at Cabinet on Thursday.

(John Hunt)

22nd May, 1979

Mr. Mike Thomas (Newcastle upon Tyne East): To ask the Prime Minister, if she will now answer Questions on the membership and terms of reference of Cabinet Committees.

DRAFT ANSWER

I have established five Standing Committees of the Cabinet: a Defence and Oversea Policy Committee and an Economic Strategy Committee, both under my chairmanship; a Home and Social Affairs Committee and a Queen's Speech and Future Legislation Committee under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary; and a Legislation Committee under the chairmanship of the Lord Chancellor. Attendance at these Committees will vary according to the subject under discussion. Where appropriate Sub-Committees of the Standing Committees will be established to deal with particular categories of business. I do not propose to add to this information, or to answer Questions about the membership, terms of reference, meetings or agendas of the Standing Committees or their Sub-Committees.

### Speaking Note for Cabinet

I have a Question this afternoon asking whether I will answer Questions on the membership and terms of reference of Cabinet Committees: and, since I shall be making a departure from previous practice I would like my colleagues to know the line that I shall be taking.

The doctrine that the forum in which Ministers reach a decision is a domestic matter and that a decision by a Cabinet Committee, unless referred to the Cabinet, engages the collective responsibility of all Ministers is a sound one. Nor is it desirable to start revealing the composition or terms of reference of individual Committees. On the other hand it is frankly absurd to disclose no information at all, particularly when it is sometimes common knowledge anyhow. I have therefore decided to make a short statement about the main Standing Committees of the Cabinet giving the names of their chairmen, but I do not intend to be drawn any further or to answer Questions about the work of Cabinet Committees. One other point. As a Government we intend to keep Committee work to a minimum: but if it becomes necessary to set up further Committees they will be established as Sub-Committees of the main Standing Committees and I will not make any further announcement about them.

The answer I shall be giving this afternoon reads as follows:-

"I have established five Standing Committees of the Cabinet: a Defence and Oversea Policy Committee and an Economic Strategy Committee, both under my chairmanship; a Home and Social Affairs Committee and a Queen's Speech and Future Legislation Committee under the chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary; and a Legislation Committee under the chairmanship of the Lord Chancellor. Attendance at these Committees will vary according to the subject under discussion. Where appropriate Sub-Committees of the Standing Committees will be established to deal with particular categories of business. I do not propose to add to this information, or to answer Questions about the membership, terms of reference, meetings or agenda of the Standing Committees or their Sub-Committees."