

11/13

Mr. Gow

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

A PRIME MINISTER'S DEPARTMENT

Mr. Ray Whitney, MP, came to see the Prime Minister at 1630 yesterday afternoon to discuss his proposal that this country should have a Prime Minister's Department. Mr. Gow and Mr. Wolfson were also present.

Mr. Whitney said that he had originally believed that the way to improve the cohesiveness of the British Government machine was to set up a Prime Minister's Department on lines similar to that in Australia. But he had now come to the conclusion that we should go for a compromise between an Australian-type solution and what we had now, for to go for a full-scale Department would be bound to lead to charges that another organisational monster was being created. He now thought that the answer was to take the CPRS, the Cabinet Office and those parts of the CSD dealing with essential interdepartmental policy matters and integrate them so that they provided the Cabinet collectively not only with the present "ears and eyes" and Secretariat capabilities but also with a "follow-through" function. He envisaged that this new Department would have at its heart a number of teams, each perhaps 6 to 8 strong, who would specialise in particular subjects. They would monitor and "second guess" all the major Government Departments. He believed that a Department fulfilling a role of this kind would provide a better service to the Cabinet collectively than they had now: there would be more informed discussion, and the Cabinet would be helped to concentrate on the main issues.

The Prime Minister commented that between them the CPRS and the Cabinet Office already did much of what Mr. Whitney had in mind. The CPRS took an interest in many of the principal problems facing Ministers at any time, and the Cabinet Office co-ordinated most interdepartmental business.

/Mr. Whitney said

Mr. Whitney said that the disadvantages of the present arrangements were that the CPRS, which was only small in size, tended to flit from one subject to another and the Secretariat side of the Cabinet Office was necessarily very generalist. He thought that the way in which Clause 17 of the Employment Act had been considered was a good example of the need which he saw his proposal satisfying. He would be surprised if a majority of the Cabinet had really focussed on this Clause when the Bill was being considered. He doubted whether they had really understood the provision. The team which, within his proposed Department, would deal with employment matters, would have highlighted in a constructive way the strength and weaknesses of the Clause, and they would have encouraged all members of the Cabinet to look carefully at it and to form a view about it. At present there was a tendency for Cabinet Ministers to ignore, gratefully, problems which fell outside their own field and to take refuge in the fact that a colleague was necessarily making the running on the particular matter.

Mr. Whitney continued that he believed the creation of a Department in the way he had suggested would be politically popular in the country. A large number of people, in voting Conservative, had voted for the Prime Minister personally, and they would approve of an organisational development which was designed to help her achieve more easily the results she was seeking. At the same time his proposed change would, as he had already pointed out, strengthen collective Government. It must not be a device for making the Prime Minister the Minister for Everything. Above all, he reiterated, he was looking for a way of improving the Cabinet's ability to follow up its decisions to ensure that they were carried out as it had intended. He wanted to get his proposal talked about. He had written an article about it for The Times, and he would now like to arrange a short conference at which the discussion could be taken further. There was already a lot of academic

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interest in his proposal, but he would like to invite to any conference not only academics but also Ministers and senior civil servants who had actual experience of working the Whitehall machine.

The Prime Minister said that there was a need to strengthen the centre for it was here that the guardians of the strategy were located. It was all too often the case that she and her central colleagues, like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had to defend the strategy against colleagues whose principal aim was to fight their departmental corner. She was happy for Mr. Whitney to go on airing his idea.

JWS.

23 December 1980



10 DOWNING STREET

22nd December, 1980

Thank you very much for having sent me a copy of your letter to Christopher Soames dated 15th October, about your idea for the creation of a Prime Minister's Department.

I know that the Prime Minister has read the article which you wrote for The Times about this.

As you know, the Prime Minister also agreed that you should talk to Derek Rayner about your proposals, and I know that you have done this.

I wonder if I could offer one personal comment on the conference you have in mind to give your idea a further airing. This concerns the possibility of Ministers and senior civil servants taking part. I should not have thought that this would be on. Whatever they said would almost certainly be interpreted by commentators as indicating the Prime Minister's own views. This would, of course, be quite misconceived. But as you know from your own experience in the FCO, whatever Ministers or their civil servants say - and however hard they may protest that they speak only for themselves - is closely scrutinised for insights into the Government's thinking. So I am very much inclined to think that any Ministers or officials who attended your conference would find themselves in an awkward spot and their attendance could easily inhibit the kind of wide-ranging and free discussions you evidently have in mind. I should not be surprised, therefore, if Lord Soames and the others to whom you copied your letter felt that they were unable to accept your invitation.

Ian Gow

Ray Whitney, Esq., OBE, MP.