

MR. VILE

c Mr. Pattison (No. 10)

Revelation of Cabinet Committees

The Prime Minister discussed with me today my minute of 10th May. No no. 10 Private Secretary was present so I am sending a copy of this minute to Mr. Pattison.

2. I began by repeating that I was relatively relaxed on the matter but that I thought she needed to consider very carefully where if she made a move forward she could draw the line at a new place on which she could stand and not get pushed further. I then drew attention to Mr. Mike Thomas's Question for Answer on Thursday, 24th May asking her whether "She will now answer Questions on the membership and terms of reference of Cabinet Committees".

3. The Prime Minister said that she would like to announce that there were four main Standing Committees of the Cabinet dealing with (i) Defence and Oversea Policy Affairs, (ii) Economic Strategy, (iii) Home Affairs and (iv) Legislation; and that she would be prepared to announce the chairman of each. She would not however be prepared to disclose the composition or terms of reference, and thought that we should use some such formula as "the composition varies from time to time and also according to the subject under discussion".

4. I pointed out to her that while I thought she had been entirely right to start with very few Committees, she would inevitably have to add some e.g. on terrorism and security and there would also be the question of ad hoc groups. She accepted the need for some additional Committees but thought we should follow the precedent established by OD(E) - in other words make them all Sub-Committees of one of the main Standing Committees of the Cabinet. She would not be prepared to disclose the existence of sub-committees or, of course, of ad hoc groups. In other words she envisaged a very cautious step forward by acknowledging the existence of the main Standing Committees of the Cabinet: and she was clear that Press Offices etc. would not be free to answer Questions about their meetings, agendas, etc.



5. I think this is workable, though there are a few loose ends to be tidied up e. g. should we announce QL as well as L?

6. I think the immediate action required is as follows:-

(a) Questions of Procedure for Ministers.

Delete the last sentence of paragraph 22. I do not think that the preceding sentence is inconsistent in any way with what the Prime Minister has decided, since she would not reveal subjects discussed by Cabinet or particular Committees.

(b) Mr. Thomas's Question of 24th May.

I think the answer should be on the lines of (but I have not had time to reflect on this carefully):-

"There are four (or five, depending on QL) main Standing Committees of the Cabinet. They are the Defence and Oversea Policy Committee, which meets under my chairmanship; the Economic Strategy Committee, which also meets under my chairmanship; the Home and Social Affairs Committee, which meets under the chairmanship of the Home Secretary; the Legislation Committee, which meets under the chairmanship of the Lord Chancellor and the Queen's Speech and Future Legislation Committee, which meets under the chairmanship of the Home Secretary. The membership of these Committees varies from time to time and also according to the subject under discussion: and each Committee has a number of Sub-Committees. I am not prepared to go further than this or to answer questions about the membership and terms of reference of the Cabinet Committees or about their various Sub-Committees".

This is very much a cockshy. I should be grateful if you would look at it carefully and let me have your comments for my box on Sunday.

(c) Given this change of policy, the Prime Minister ought perhaps to tell the Cabinet what she is proposing to do and where she intends to draw the line in future. Similarly I ought perhaps to make the position clear to Permanent Secretaries.

17th May 1979

John Hunt