

Mr Thatcher

TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE LEADER'S CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

I enclose a paper on Tactics In The House Of Commons
by Mr. Jenkin for the meeting of the Shadow Cabinet on
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TACTICS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

(Paper by Mr. Jenkin)

1. The character of Parliament is changing fundamentally with the growth of the Select Committee system. One consequence is that even the most important debates in the Chamber are sparsely attended. At the same time, with a few notable exceptions, the work of the Select Committees goes unheeded despite the amount of time and effort put into them. Is this the way Parliament ought to operate? Does it suit the Party, either in Opposition or in Government, that it should operate in this way?
2. There seem to be two broad options - (a) to recognise that Parliament is changing irreversibly and that strategy and tactics must follow suit; or (b) to try to curtail drastically the amount of Committee work undertaken and so seek to restore to the Chamber the importance which it held hitherto.

3. Option A

The following considerations may be relevant:-

(a) The growth of the Select Committee system sprang from a recognition that the procedures of the House (debates, PQs etc) are today inadequate to hold Ministers properly accountable. M.P.'s, it is argued, need both to become better briefed and to be able to confront Ministers and officials in lengthy interrogation if they are effectively to challenge the Executive. Only Select Committees can do this.

(b) Apart from special occasions when the Whips are off, the outcome of debates on the floor of the House, is a foregone conclusion. The fact that the minority Parties may vote one way or the other does not materially alter this pattern except to the extent that the chance of a Government defeat arouses its own interest. This is quite different from arousing interest in the merits of the arguments; in the great majority of debates today not one single vote is ever likely to be swayed by the arguments deployed during the course of the debate.

(c) Supply Days in particular have lost much of their impact. The practice of using such debates primarily to embarrass or challenge the Government means that the subjects chosen tend to reflect the on-going Party struggle with which, increasingly, the public are disenchanted. Because the public are disenchanted, the Press ignore the debates. Because the Press ignore the debates, back-bench Members do not think it worthwhile spending time and trouble in preparing speeches and catching the Speaker's eye. Debates

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thus tend to fizzle out and the Whips have to hunt around for enough speakers just to keep the debate going until 10.00 p.m.

(d) The Select Committee system, properly used, can have, and has had, major political impact. I have had to live in the shadow of the damaging PAC report on North Sea Oil. Our opponents succeeded in turning that investigation into a major political victory because from the outset Labour M.P.'s ensured that they were effectively briefed. A more recent success story is that of the Select Committee on the Wealth Tax. By a well managed campaign, they have succeeded in casting serious doubts on the Government's proposals. The General Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Expenditure has begun to expose the Government's appalling spending record. They have succeeded, moreover, where the original plan of an annual two-day debate on the floor of the House was a conspicuous failure.

4. If we go for Option A, we must seek to tailor our tactics accordingly:

(a) Much more prestige should attach to the membership of major Select Committees, and more attention should be given to the choice of members.

(b) The Party should seek a greater say in the subjects for study.

(c) More co-ordination should take place between Party Committees and Tory members serving on Select Committees, and the rules should be relaxed to allow this to take place.

(d) Tory members should receive more outside Party briefing on matters coming before them.

(e) Reports of Select Committees should be debated more often - it would be a more effective use of Supply Day time than picking some subject out of the air.

(f) One would have to consider televising or broadcasting Committee proceedings.

5. Option B

The main argument in favour of Option B is that it is in the Chamber that a Government can most damagingly be embarrassed - rarely in a single debate, more often over time on a range of related issues. The Chamber should be able to catch the public eye (or ear, if we make radio broadcasting permanent) more effectively than any number of Committees upstairs. But to restore this process, a number of things need to be done:-

(a) There needs to be a more coherent strategy on the choice of supply subjects.

...../ (b) Far more

(b) Far more preparation is needed before a team launches its attack, and for this much longer warning must be given.

(c) The Party must support the attack by its presence in the House.

(d) The attack needs to be co-ordinated with Press and Television comment.

(e) Far fewer Select Committees (and Party Committees?) should exist to distract attention from the Chamber. Most would have to be scrapped.

6. Conclusion

At present, we seem to get the worst of all worlds - dozens of Select Committees beavering away in comparative obscurity, and empty benches in the Chamber. We must try to decide which we want - to upgrade and throw the floodlights on the Committees, or downgrade them and seek to restore the limelight to the Chamber. One thing is clear: going on as we are is not proving very satisfactory.

Patrick Jenkin