

L.C.(60) 4th Meeting

CABINET

LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

EXTRACT

FROM:

MINUTES of a Meeting of the Committee held in Conference Room 'B', Cabinet Office, Great George Street, S.W.1., on TUESDAY, 2nd FEBRUARY, 1960, at 9.30 a.m.

3. PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS: 5th FEBRUARY, 1960

The Committee discussed the Bills on the Order Paper for 5th February.

- (1) Public Bodies (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Bill - Mrs. Thatcher  
(Previous Reference: L.C.(60) 1st Meeting, Minute 3)

THE MINISTER OF HOUSING said that Mrs. Thatcher had introduced the Public Bodies (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Bill in the form handed to her by the Government, when it had been made clear to her that the Government were not committed to supporting it on Second Reading. He proposed, as had been agreed by the Home Affairs Committee, that the Government should express the view that, while there were admitted deficiencies in the Local Authorities (Admission of the Press to Meetings) Act, 1908, it was a matter for the House to decide whether that Act should be replaced by provisions on the lines of those in Mrs. Thatcher's Bill. It was likely that the debate on Second Reading would last all day.

In discussion the Committee were reminded that the Government had undertaken at the time of the General Election to ensure that the press had proper facilities for reporting the proceedings of local authorities. Though no pledge had been given that legislation would be introduced (and it would, indeed, have been preferable that the problem should be dealt with by means short of legislation), now that a Bill was before the House it appeared desirable that the Government should support it. On the other hand, it would be inadvisable for the Government openly to support the Bill unless there were a reasonable assurance that it would not be defeated on Second Reading, and it was difficult at present to estimate how much support the Bill would receive. Opposition to it was growing in local authority circles and Government supporters were known to be divided in their attitude. Even if the Bill were defeated, it would still be possible, in the view of the Minister of Housing, for the Government to enter into negotiations for the adoption by local authorities of a voluntary code of conduct.

THE LORD CHANCELLOR said that, while it would be advantageous that the Bill now before the House should progress, the Minister of Housing must be given discretion to decide his tactics in the Second Reading debate, in the light of the Committee's discussion. It would be necessary to judge from the course of the debate itself the extent to which the Government could safely indicate approval and support for the Bill; and the Minister should remain in consultation with the Chief Whip on this.

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