

ADMISSION OF THE PRESS

I had a talk with Mrs. Thatcher to-day; following her talk yesterday with the representatives of the four Associations she has now concluded that her Bill should cover the following matters:

(1) The Press should be given a right of admission only to the full council (as in the 1908 Act); to the council resolved ad hoc into committee; to bodies exercising statutory powers (viz: the Watch Committee and the Standing Joint Committee); to committees exercising delegated powers.

(2) She recognises that any of these bodies must be entitled to exclude the Press in the "public interest" but she wants the "public interest" more closely defined. She has thought of five categories of case which she thinks warrant exclusion of the Press, viz: where the personal circumstances of interested parties are involved, or the personal circumstances of an officer or member, or there is to be discussion of legal proceedings, or of tenders, or of proposed acquisitions. Mr. Dacey said he could add 30 more cases and the local authorities are now making a list of circumstances in which they think the exclusion of the Press would be justified and seeing whether they can distil two or three principles out of this list.

(3) The Press should be provided with an agenda of any meeting to which they are to be admitted at least three days before the meeting and the agenda should be sufficient to show the nature of the matters to be discussed and of the decisions to be taken. She is inclined to add that where the agenda includes reports of committees they should set out both the proposed decisions and the reasons for them, and should also record any dissentient opinion supported by some minimum number of members.

(4) She agrees that some documents circulated to members of the council or committee cannot be provided to the Press and she is troubled how to define the grounds for exclusion. She has in mind any defamatory matter, minutes of officers, personal details, details of tenders.

(5) She would like to provide that the Press must be given minimum facilities and wondered whether they could be prescribed in regulations made by the Minister.

(6) She thought it might be provided that although the Press were present certain matters could not be reported, e.g., remarks by officials.

(7) She wants to provide a sanction and thought it should be by way of a penalty on members voting for a resolution not in accordance with the Bill.

(8) She wants to provide for the admission of the public as well as the Press.

(9) She thinks the Bill should apply to some public bodies other than local authorities and specifically mentioned the Hospital Management Committees. She accepted that the schedule attached to Mr. Simon's Bill was far too long and would be content to list very few additional bodies to whom the Bill should apply.

I said that I thought we might be able to work out a Bill on these lines but that we would have to give discretion to local authorities to exclude the Press from bodies to which the Bill would give them admission where those bodies habitually deal with matters which ought to be discussed in private.

Generally ...

Generally I thought the Bill would have to be more limited than Mrs. Thatcher envisaged and that she would have to accept that it must be drawn in such a way that a local authority could still deny proper facilities to the Press; as unless we did so we should find ourselves tying local authorities too tightly.

I told Mrs. Thatcher that we had had it in mind to agree a "code of behaviour" with the representatives of the local authorities and to issue that to all local authorities in an effort to get the position satisfactory without legislation; I thought that even if her Bill reached the statute book this code would still be necessary, and hoped she would agree that a certain amount ~~sh~~ should be left to the code; and I thought that the Minister might be prepared to say that if local authorities abused the discretion which the Bill allowed them then he would have to consider strengthening the provisions of the Bill.

Mrs. Thatcher ended by saying that she would be content with any Bill that meant a real advance and she recognised that if she introduced too detailed a Bill she was likely to lose it.

I am not confident that she will accept the only sort of Bill that I think we can reasonably offer; she is likely anyway to have trouble with some of her supporters. She may yet take Mr. Simon's Bill and try to touch that up. I warned her flatly that if she did I thought the Government would be bound to advise the House to vote against it and that the local authorities would secure sufficient opposition to it to ensure that it did not get second reading. She may however yet decide to go for the tougher Bill even though she knows it will fail. She is, however, dismayed at the drafting problem and I think she really recognises the difficulties of local authorities. She did say, for example, that she had no quarrel whatever with the L.C.C.; and when I pointed out to her that they do not admit the Press to any of their committees but in fact achieve a more satisfactory service to the Press by providing information (something which any Bill may easily wreck) she was a little taken aback.

I told her finally that we would aim to let her know in a couple of weeks' time or so whether the Government was prepared to assist in drafting and if so on what terms.

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2nd December, 1959.

Mr. Brian

We have discussed and you
are preparing a Paper for M.A.C.

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