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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

18 March 1982

Dear John,

PRESIDENT REAGAN'S VISIT

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning to consider further the question where within the Palace of Westminster President Reagan should address Members of both Houses of Parliament when he was in this country in June. The Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Lord President, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Chief Whip were all present.

The Prime Minister said that she had now had replies to her letter of 9 March from Mr Foot, Mr Steel and Dr Owen (a copy of Dr Owen's letter is attached). The Labour and Liberal parties were clearly against the use of Westminster Hall and in favour of the Royal Gallery. The SDP preferred the Royal Gallery but did not believe that this should be a sticking point: they were anxious that nothing should be done which the Americans would interpret as an affront to President Reagan.

In discussion it was argued that the Royal Gallery was not worthy of the occasion. It was not sufficiently dignified. Its acoustics were bad, and the seating was uncomfortable. Westminster Hall, on the other hand, was worthy of the dignity of the country, and not to allow President Reagan to speak there would be an insult to the United States. If the Government decided to go for the Royal Gallery, it would be putting itself in the wrong by appearing to accept the arguments of Mr Foot and Mr Steel.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the issue was whether it would look better to have the ceremony in the more splendid setting of Westminster Hall and suffer a boycott by the Labour Party, which would be impossible to conceal, or for the address to be given in the Royal Gallery and to be sure that at least some Members of the Labour Party would be present. It was surely important that the occasion should occur with the maximum of good grace and the minimum of controversy. The fact was that some factions of the Labour Party were clearly bent not just on a passive boycott of President Reagan's visit but on active opposition. These considerations all pointed to the use of the Royal Gallery. It could be argued that this would be a climb down for the Government and an affront to the Americans. But it would be seen as a far bigger reverse for the Government

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and a more humiliating affront to the Americans if the whole of the Opposition boycotted President Reagan's address. In any case there was no reason why the use of the Royal Gallery should be seen as an insult to President Reagan. Many other very eminent foreign statesmen had addressed Members of both Houses of Parliament there. It was a magnificent room and it could house a splendid ceremony. If it was decided that the address should be given in the Royal Gallery, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary would need a little time before any public announcement in order to prepare the ground with the Americans. Both Mr Streator of the US Embassy and Sir Nicholas Henderson had said that they anticipated no difficulty in getting the American authorities to accept the use of the Royal Gallery.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the meeting was on balance in favour of using the Royal Gallery. This decision would have to be conveyed to the Opposition Parties, and the Americans would have to be consulted about it. It was also necessary formally to approach the Lord Great Chamberlain for permission to use the Royal Gallery. She would have to let the Speaker know what was now proposed. She would give further thought to the timing and order of the various consultations which now had to be undertaken.

I am sending copies of this letter to Michael Collon (Lord Chancellor's Office), Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), David Heyhoe (Lord President's Office), Michael Pownall (Office of the Leader of the House of Lords), and Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office).

Yours wv,

Mire Whitmore.

John Halliday Esq.,  
Home Office.

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