

SUBJECT



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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

11 March 1982

Dear Brian,

VISIT OF PRESIDENT REAGAN

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary saw Mr Michael Foot and Mr Denis Healey at their request in the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons this morning to discuss the proposal that President Reagan should be invited to address Members of both Houses of Parliament when he was here in June.

Mr Foot said that he had now been able to consult the Shadow Cabinet and they had endorsed the line which he had taken when he had seen the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary earlier in the week. They believed that the Government had made a great mistake in not consulting the Opposition before it put even a tentative proposition to the American Government. Had the Labour Party been consulted at the outset they could have put their views to the Government without any embarrassment to the Americans. But the Government had not chosen to proceed in that way and we were now in the present difficult situation. This was not the fault of the United States Government: it was the fault of the British Government.

The Shadow Cabinet believed that, in view of the approaches which had been made to the Americans, there was no alternative but to allow the suggestion that President Reagan should address Members of both Houses of Parliament to stand. But it was their strongly held view that he should not make his speech in Westminster Hall. The best way of defusing the present situation was to invite the President to deliver his address in the Royal Gallery, which was where nearly all other foreign leaders had spoken to the Members of both Houses.

In response to a question by the Prime Minister, Mr Foot said that even if this solution was adopted, he was not saying that some Labour MPs would not object to an address by President Reagan. But the problems would be very much greater if the Government went ahead with the proposal to use Westminster Hall. If President Reagan spoke in Westminster Hall, a Motion to suspend the sitting of the House of Commons would be needed. There would be a debate on the Motion, and this would almost certainly give rise to trouble. He feared that if Westminster Hall were used, "instead of a ceremony of decorum, it would turn into a shambles". If, on the other hand, President Reagan spoke in the Royal Gallery, the House would continue to sit and business would not be held up. He hoped very much that the Government would take account of his

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representations which reflected, he knew, feelings in many parts of the House. He understood that the Liberal Party were against the use of Westminster Hall as well as the Labour Party.

In reply to a question by the Foreign Secretary, Mr Foot said that if the ceremony were held in the Royal Gallery he would consider an invitation to be present himself and "would probably be there".

Mr Healey said that he would definitely attend an address given by President Reagan in the Royal Gallery. He was quite clear that this was where the ceremony should take place. Only one statesman, President de Gaulle, had given an address to the Members of both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall since the war. All other such addresses had been given at more informal meetings with Members of both Houses in the Royal Gallery. The great majority of Labour Members saw no reason why President Reagan after only one year in office should receive more distinguished treatment than Chancellor Brandt and President Giscard. He did not believe that a comparison, for this purpose, between President Reagan and President de Gaulle was relevant. When he had come to London in 1960 President de Gaulle had been a much bigger figure than President Reagan was now.

The Prime Minister said that she understood the Labour Party's annoyance over the lack of consultation about the proposal to invite President Reagan to address Members of both Houses before the news of that proposal had leaked, but she still thought that it had been sensible to sound out the Americans on a provisional basis first to see whether the idea of an address commended itself at all to President Reagan. The fact was that the Americans were our staunchest ally and our closest friends and in suggesting that President Reagan should give an address, the Government was acknowledging the importance of his office. This was why she believed that President Reagan should be accorded the same treatment as President de Gaulle. It was true that other American Presidents in the post-war years had not been invited to address Members of both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall, but none of them had come as the guest of The Queen. She feared that if President Reagan was now asked to speak in the Royal Gallery instead of Westminster Hall, this would be seen here and in the United States as an attempt to downgrade him and his visit. Moreover, she found it difficult to understand why anybody who was ready to listen to him in the Royal Gallery would not do so in Westminster Hall.

The Foreign Secretary said that he believed that it would appear to the Americans that we were downgrading the President's visit if any attempt was made to play up the difference between Westminster Hall and the Royal Gallery, and this would be very embarrassing indeed.

Mr Healey said that the Shadow Cabinet did not want the incident to inflict more damage on Anglo-American relations than was necessary. It was for this reason that they believed that the Government's best course was to invite President Reagan to

speak in the Royal Gallery.

Mr Foot said that if the Government decided that the address should be given in the Royal Gallery, he and his colleagues would not try to depict this as a victory for them. They were only trying to find the most appropriate way of dealing with the problem. This was, he repeated, to use the Royal Gallery. If, nonetheless, the Government insisted on using Westminster Hall, the difficulties he had already described might well arise. He would have been against the use of Westminster Hall, even if the Government had consulted him at the very outset. He would now reply formally to the Prime Minister's letter of 9 March, confirming what he had said at their meeting.

The Prime Minister said that she and her colleagues would consider his response.

Mr Foot's reply arrived in the course of this afternoon, and I attach a copy. The Prime Minister has not yet seen this, but if, as I imagine will be the case, she wishes to discuss this with her colleagues most concerned, we will be in touch with you and with the copy addressees of this letter to arrange a meeting.

I am sending copies of this letter and of Mr Foot's letter to Michael Collon (Lord Chancellor's 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 ever,

Alfred Wharman.

Brian Fall Esq.,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.