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Ref: A01766

Prime Minister.

Content with the draft reply to Mr Nott?

MR. WHITMORE

Do you want to consider relaxing your present degree of control over foreign visits by non-Cabinet Ministers? If so, I will amend the last sentence of para 7 of the draft minute to say you are looking at this.

The Secretary of State for Trade sent me a copy of his minute of

12th March to the Prime Minister about waste in Government. I promised to suggest a draft minute for the Prime Minister to send him in reply. The draft takes account of Mr. Channon's minute of 20th March, as well as of comments from Sir Ian Bancroft and my own colleagues in the Cabinet Office (including Sir Kenneth Berrill).

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2. The way which paragraph 6 deals with the question of consulting the Prime Minister on appointments at Deputy Chairman level is based on advice from Sir Ian Bancroft. I think that this is very much up to the Prime Minister how close a watch she wants to keep on the appointments her Ministers are making below Chairman level. I can only say that, when I was Permanent Under Secretary at the Home Office I accepted without question our duty to consult No. 10 on the appointments of Chairmen; of course all appointments to the broadcasting authorities had a strong political flavour and it was certainly right to consult No. 10; but I must say I used to chafe a bit when we were told we had to consult No. 10 about the appointments of Deputy Chairmen of bodies like the Gaming Board. If the Prime Minister agrees with the general line in the draft minute, I will try to find words for a revision of "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" which provide the sort of flexibility which would make sense.

Robert  
There was a lot of good talk in John Nott's minute and before we reply I would really like to discuss it with you.

RAA

(Robert Armstrong)

21st March 1980

There is a letter dated 2-5. I think there is some sense in what you say. I think it is worth making a note of this. I think it is worth making a note of this. I think it is worth making a note of this.

DRAFT MINUTE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE

Thank you for your minute of 12th March about waste in Government.

2. On Cabinet Committees, I agree that we must use the system and not let the system take us over, and I am all for Ministers exchanging views with each other informally. In principle I am in favour of keeping down the number of Committees and of Committee meetings. But the system has certain advantages, apart from those you mention - the crystallisation of issues and the proper recording of decisions, which are themselves important for good Government - where there is an issue of policy which affects several Ministers, where it is important for collective responsibility to be engaged, or where a Minister wants to have the advice of his colleagues. It enables senior Ministers to exercise a political influence on decisions going beyond their departmental interests. And it helps us to know what each other is proposing and doing: something that is even more important in Government than in Opposition, because the consistency and coherence of our policies is under closer and more constant scrutiny. And, if you want your colleagues to defend what you are doing, there is a lot to be said for enabling them to know what you have in mind, and to comment on it if they want to do so, before you actually do it. Cabinet and its Committees provide an effective framework for achieving that, and a system for enabling us to deal with issues in an orderly way and at the right time.

3. I agree with you that discussion of something in a Cabinet Committee should not necessarily mean that every subsequent development must be reported back in correspondence to all the Ministers sitting on the Committee. On the other hand there

will be many occasions when Committee colleagues have an interest in seeing the outcome of their earlier discussions or when an exchange of correspondence is less expensive and less prodigal of Ministerial time and effort as a means of exchanging views, imparting information, or even agreeing a decision than summoning all those same Ministers to a meeting. The only way of disciplining the proliferation of copies is for those whose duty it is to decide - usually in Private Offices - to whom documents are to be copied to consider proposed distributions and confine them strictly to those with a positive need to know.

4. As to sponsorship, if it means no more than that any given industry will have its primary contact with Government in one particular Department, it is natural: many industrialists do not understand the finer points of the machinery of government, and have become used to having one Department to which they can turn whatever their problem, one man whom they can look to as something of a "friend at court", if only for a steer in the direction of another Department. But of course we ought to look critically at these activities, and I agree with you that there are considerable savings to be won by cutting out departmental activities which consist simply of monitoring what other Departments are doing. If, for instance, a company comes to the Department of Industry with a problem that is purely and simply for the Department of the Environment, then it should be directed to that Department, and there is no need for the Department of Industry to remain in the picture. I see from Paul Channon's minute of 20th March that he is going to put some proposals to us on this subject.

5. No doubt the Chief Secretary, the Minister of State, Civil Service Department, and the Secretary of State for the Environment will consider what you say about delegated authorities. There are public accountability issues to take into

account. But delegated authorities should clearly be kept under critical review, and revised - or eliminated - if they are needlessly restrictive. I think it is up to Departments to take the matter up with the Treasury - or whatever other Department is delegating authority - when they think something needs to be done.

6. On public appointments, I am in no doubt that the Prime Minister should be consulted in advance about the appointment of all Chairmen of nationalised industries and public boards, and about all appointments of members which have political significance or implications. The requirement to consult about appointments of Deputy Chairmen is of long-standing, and reflects the fact that a Deputy Chairman can often be asked to stand in for, or even take over from, a Chairman. I think that the requirement is right as a general rule, but the procedures should be sufficiently flexible to allow for the occasional exceptions where it is obviously inappropriate.

Ready to go  
his for?

7. On attendance at Cabinet, I am prepared to waive the requirement of a personal minute seeking permission to be absent from a Cabinet meeting, where the absence is accounted for by an overseas visit which I have approved; but on the understanding that the request for approval for the visit is copied to the Secretary of the Cabinet, who needs to know who is away when, for the purpose of drawing up the meeting arrangements. I do think it desirable that I should be personally involved for overseas visits by all Ministers, not just by Cabinet Ministers.

8. I am asking the Secretary of the Cabinet to consider how "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" should be revised to take account of the changes I have agreed to make in paragraphs 6 and 7 of this minute, which I am copying to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretaries of State for Industry and the Environment, and the Minister of State, Civil Service Department, as well as to Sir Robert Armstrong.