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Subject



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

Personal Minute

No. M 10/80.

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE

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

I propose to hold a special meeting of the Cabinet on 25 April to discuss questions of efficiency and manpower policy in the Civil Service. Your minute raises a number of points which we should consider at that meeting, and I am sending copies of it, with copies of this minute, to all Cabinet colleagues.

On Cabinet Committees I agree that we must make the system work for us and not let it take us over. In principle I am in favour of keeping down the numbers both of Committees and of Committee meetings. I am told that in both respects we still compare well with previous Governments. But do not let us lose sight of what the system can do for us. Apart from the advantages you mention - the crystallisation of issues and the proper recording of decisions - it is one way of enabling senior Ministers to exercise a political influence on decisions going beyond their departmental interests; and it helps us to know, and so to be able to defend, what each other is proposing and doing. The system provides a convenient framework for that, and for enabling us to deal with issues in an orderly way and at the right time.

The fact that something has been discussed in a Cabinet Committee should not mean that every subsequent development must be reported back in correspondence copied to all members of the Committee.

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There are times when an exchange of correspondence is a less wasteful way of exchanging information or agreeing decisions than a meeting would be. But the ease with which documents can be copied makes people thoughtless about proliferation of them, which is not only wasteful but bad for security. The only way of disciplining prodigality is for those whose duty it is to decide to whom documents are to be copied to confine them always and strictly to those with a positive need to know. Ministers and their Private Offices should set an example on this.

As to sponsorship, each industry has a primary relationship with Government in one particular Department. That does not mean that that Department needs to monitor all that industry's relations with Government. 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. I am glad that Paul Channon is going to put proposals to us on this.

As to delegated authorities, the problem is to make Ministers and their Departments cost-conscious. You mentioned the CSD control over purchase of vehicles for the Coastguards. I am told that, left to itself, the Department would have spent a great deal more than they needed to spend. I should like to see the central departments concentrate more on broad control of expenditure, setting general rules and standards and leaving detail to spending departments; but we shall have to find some way of making Ministers and their departments more cost and resource conscious than they seem to be. We need to look at the whole problem of control of expenditure. We must discuss this, amongst other things, on 25 April.

On public appointments, I should like to continue to be consulted in advance about the appointment of all chairmen of nationalised industries and public ^{boards} appointments, and about all appointments of members which have political significance or implications. I am content not to be consulted about appointments of Deputy Chairmen, except those which have political implications, but in deciding whether or not to consult me I would like colleagues to bear in mind that a Deputy Chairman can often be asked to stand in for, or even take over from, a Chairman.

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, 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.

I am content not to be consulted about overseas visits by Ministers other than Cabinet Ministers, provided that such visits are approved by the Ministerial head of the department concerned, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Chief Whip. I gather that at least one Department has introduced a cash limit on travel by Ministers; that is an example that others could well follow, to keep this expenditure in bounds. This change of procedure does not affect the requirement for my approval to be sought for official visits overseas by Ministers' spouses and by Parliamentary Private Secretaries (see paragraphs 54 and 55 of Questions of Procedure for Ministers (C(P)(79)1)).

I am sending a copy of this minute to the Secretary of the Cabinet, who will arrange for "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" to be revised to take account of paragraphs 7, 8 and 9.

Raymond Thelton

10 April 1980

- 1) Paragraph 7 - copied to J. Potter.
- 2) Paragraph 8 - copied to Cabinet (Attendance) May 1979.
- 3) Paragraph 9 - copied Ministers Absences Policy file.
- 4) copy of minute to Cabinet: Questions of Procedure for Ministers: May 1979
- 5) copy of minute to Cabinet: Committee Structure: May 1979.