



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

24 September 1983

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Dear Mr. Owen.

Thank you for your letter of 15 September about the Government Information Service.

First, let me assure you that I wholeheartedly endorse Lord Swinton's definition of the job of the Government Information Service.

The Prime Minister's Press Secretary is in an especially delicate and exposed position. He is a public servant, and (in Mr. Ingham's case) a career civil servant; on the other hand he is the principal spokesman for the Prime Minister who is at one and the same time the Head of the Government and the leader of a political party. He inevitably operates in a political context and needs to possess a high degree of political awareness. But it remains his duty to give prompt and accurate information objectively day by day about Government action and Government policy. It is not his job to try and persuade the press to boost the Government; but it is within his duties to seek to counter misinformation - or disinformation - about Government actions and policies.

I presume that in your third paragraph you are referring to recent press stories that there was a plan to create some sort of "information overlord" and give those duties to Mr. Ingham. I can assure you that those stories were

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misconceived and mischievous. I do not have and have never had any intention or plan to centralise control of Government information in 10 Downing Street, and I have no plans to extend the responsibilities of my Chief Press Secretary.

You also criticise the Government for producing the document "The Future of Telecommunications - Government Policy Explained". I do not accept your contention that this document represents a breach of the conventions in regard to paid publicity. It was produced essentially as the standard enclosure for replies sent to the many letters received which enquired about the reasons for the Government's policy on telecommunications. These letters evidently stemmed from a campaign against the Telecommunications Bills, and they reflected public concern aroused largely by scare stories that had no foundation in fact - for example, that most public call boxes would be abolished, or that blind people would lose their jobs because their special telephones would be withdrawn.

One way to have dealt with the problem presented by this campaign would have been to prepare a separate detailed response to each and every letter received. At first this was done, but at a high cost in time and money. It was clearly more economical and efficient to produce a document which answered all the queries being received and which could be sent to all enquirers and to bodies with an interest in the Government's proposals and the reasons for them. Because of Press interest, a limited number of copies was sent also to the Commons Press Gallery and others in the media with a special interest in telecommunications; and as a parliamentary courtesy copies were also sent to all Members of Parliament.

The document was in no sense an attempt to use the information services improperly to persuade the public to support a particular policy. Had that been so, it would clearly not have been drafted simply as an answer to the questions being

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raised; it would have been given a wide circulation instead of being sent only to enquirers and those with a special interest, and its publication would have been given maximum publicity instead of being factually announced in answer to a Parliamentary Question and in a press notice. Its intention was simply to answer questions stemming from the campaign against the Bill and to remove unnecessary anxiety and distress caused amongst people who did not understand - or were being misled about - the Government's policy.

You will understand from what I have said that the Government has no intention of withdrawing this document, nor do I see any reason why it should do so.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen, M.P.