

SUBJECT



10 DOWNING STREET

C. Master

Paul W. ...

From the Principal Private Secretary

15 October 1981

Dear Michael,

House of Lords Reform

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning in her suite in the Imperial Hotel, Blackpool, to decide what line the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster should take in replying to the debate at the Conservative Party Conference on the motion:

"Conference believes that reform of the House of Lords is an urgent matter and steps should be taken in the lifetime of this Parliament to ensure that Britain's second chamber retain the experience and integrity of the present system whilst gaining constitutional authority that would accrue if it were wholly or partly elected."

As well as Lady Young, the Home Secretary and the Lord President were present.

In discussion it was pointed out that Lady Young would be in some difficulty in responding to the debate because of the temporising line which had been taken by the then Chancellor of the Duchy in a similar debate at last year's Conference. It was important that we did not fall into the same mistake on this occasion: otherwise we should only be storing up problems for ourselves at next year's Conference. Rather, Lady Young should tell the Conference frankly why the Government had been able to make so little progress since the previous year's debate and what the very real difficulties about House of Lords reform were.

After further discussion the Prime Minister said that in her speech the Chancellor of the Duchy should acknowledge that what lay behind the motion was an anxiety on the part of many people that this country might one day have a House of Commons with an extreme left-wing majority and a desire to have in the House of Lords a stable and permanent institution which would offer some kind of protection against the activities of such a House of Commons. She should then go on to list the various ways in which the House of Lords might be reformed. She should make it clear that the Government had been giving all these careful consideration over the past year but had had to conclude that there was an insufficient measure of agreement on any single one of them to make it possible to move forward in the immediate future. Moreover, even if the Government could

agree on the form which House of Lords reform should take, to introduce legislation would be a signal to the Opposition to use every conceivable means of resisting the whole of the rest of the Government's legislative programme on the floor of the House. The Chancellor of the Duchy should nonetheless explain that, notwithstanding the great difficulties which the work Ministers had already done had identified, their study of the matter was continuing. There was, however, no question of the Government being able to do anything about the reform of the House of Lords in the present Parliament. In any case it had a very full programme of other legislative measures which the Conservative Party was anxious to see enacted before the next Election. For these reasons she would not be able to accept the motion. She might add in conclusion that the surest way of dealing with people's anxiety about what an extreme left-wing majority in the House of Commons might do was to go on returning a Conservative Government.

I am sending copies of this letter to John Halliday (Home Office), David Heyhoe (Lord President's Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours etc,

Marie Whitmore.

Michael Pownall, Esq.,
Chief Whip's Office, House of Lords.