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PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE  
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

1 August 1984

*Dear John,*

ABOLITION OF THE GLC AND MCCs

Your Secretary of State met the Lord President this morning to discuss the presentation of the Government's case for the abolition of the Greater London Council and the metropolitan county councils. Lord Bellwin, Mr Gummer, Sir George Young and Mr Waldegrave were present and Sir George Moseley, Mr Heiser, Mr McDonald and Mr Ingham also attended.

In his letter to you of 19 July Andrew Turnbull said that the Prime Minister wished the Lord President to take on the task of co-ordinating a Government campaign and of resolving such issues as the use that can properly be made of paid advertising and advice.

The Lord President said that he had again consulted the Treasury and the Central Office of Information about paid advertising. It was clear that Government departments were, subject to their accounting officers' views, free to spend on factual advertising about legislation which was already on the Statute book. His own view was that the Government had little to gain from seeking to widen that well-established convention of self-restraint. There was no way in which it could, in the short term, impose comparable restrictions on local authority spending on advertising and political propaganda, but if the Government itself ceased to be scrupulous in such matters it would be vulnerable to criticism. The use of paid public relations consultants would be a new departure and could also be criticised. It was inevitable that there would be disparities in the standards of conduct observed by central and local government, and central government could not hope to match local authority advertising campaigns without serious derogation from the standards it would prefer to see universally adopted. Neither could it hope to match the great scale of local authority expenditure on advertising. While the Government should be as vigorous as possible in presenting its case, it was preferable that it should do so without departing from the established convention.

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In discussion, it was pointed out that many of the Government's supporters were disappointed at its apparent failure to counter the arguments of those who opposed its policies on local authorities. They did not understand the constraints under which the Government operated. But Government backbenchers tended to criticise the Government's presentation without themselves offering to help by speaking in favour of the Government's policies. Local authorities were mounting expensive and highly professional campaigns against the abolition of the GLC and the metropolitan county councils and it was likely that such purportedly factual advertising would become a regular feature in local elections.

It was agreed that a considerable amount could be done by central Government without departing from the usual rules. The factual basis of the Rates Act (and possibly the Local Government (Interim Provisions) Act) could be clearly advertised. The message to be conveyed was the reason why rates had to be capped; what limits were being imposed and how those should affect the individual ratepayer; that rates could be capped without necessarily affecting the quality of local services; and that rate capping was not a Government attack on the local authorities, but an attempt to protect the ratepayer from profligacy. That message would provide the public with the material which refuted the local authorities' claims. The Central Office of Information had assigned the advertising agency J Walter Thompson (JWT) to work for the Department of the Environment. The meeting agreed that the Department should discuss with JWT the message which the Government wished to convey and the audience at which it should be aimed, and should invite the agency to present its proposals for the format, cost, content and method of a campaign. The agency's advice should cover the use of local press, radio and leaflets, and should be available by the week beginning 11 September. In the light of that presentation, Ministers would consider what work should be commissioned. They would need then to bear in mind the difficulties which could arise if advertisements appeared to pre-empt the decisions which your Secretary of State will have to make on the outstanding issues on local authority expenditure.

On the next Session's Bill to abolish the GLC and metropolitan county councils, it would not be possible to make use of paid advertising until the legislation was passed. It was, however, desirable to mount an early and sustained campaign in favour of the abolition policy. The Secretary of State for Employment's recent brief exercise in involving backbenchers in presenting the Government's views on the dock strike had been very successful. A similar effort should be made on abolition. Backbench Members of Parliament could often speak more freely and robustly than Government Ministers, and generally responded very willingly to appeals to help present the Government's case. They should be provided with briefing material and should be encouraged to

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Speak as often as possible within a co-ordinated campaign. Particular attention should be given to local radio, but the argument should also be carried outside the areas immediately concerned and presented nationally. Members of Parliament representing constituencies within the GLC and metropolitan county councils should speak not only for their own areas, but for others similarly affected. The message in this case was that local services were better provided locally; that services could be provided more cheaply and more responsively by individual boroughs; and that the second tier authorities, unlike the boroughs, were not directly accountable to the electorate for their expenditure. The Department of the Environment should provide clear briefing on how abolition would save money.

The Lord President invited your Secretary of State to appoint one of his Ministers in the House of Commons to be in charge of such an operation. It should be set in hand as quickly as possible so that the Ministers and backbenchers involved were ready to speak in the campaigns running up to the London borough by-elections on 20 September. The Lord President would give whatever help your Secretary of State might think appropriate in encouraging individuals to take part in the operation.

I am sending copies of this letter to Andrew Turnbull (No 10), to the Private Secretaries of the Ministers who attended the meeting, to Sir George Moseley, Mr Heiser, Mr McDonald and Mr Ingham and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

*Yours sincerely,*

*Janet Lewis-Jones*

JANET A LEWIS-JONES  
Private Secretary

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