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Secretary of State for Industry

DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY
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18 December 1981

The Rt Hon John Biffen MP
 Secretary of State for Trade
 Department of Trade
 1 Victoria Street
 London SW1

Dear John,

MEETING OF MISC 14: 30 NOVEMBER 1981

I was sorry to read in your letter of 7 December that you do not consider that there should be any discussion about Departmental responsibility for standards as part of our MISC 14 remit to consider improvements to the co-ordination of Government responsibilities for standards and related subjects such as certification and quality.

2 We all recognise that standards have an essential part to play in strengthening British industry by improving the quality and reliability of its products and consequently its competitiveness and performance in both the home and overseas markets. I see my task as Secretary of State for Industry as being to improve industrial performance to the extent that it is possible for Government to do this. I see support for standards as an integral part of an industrial policy which also includes support for investment in new technologies, encouragement of research and development and promotion of enlightened public purchasing.

3 Many of my officials are already heavily involved in standards writing in the BSI and international standards bodies. The Requirements Boards give considerable support to research which leads directly, or incidentally, to the production of better standards. The National Physical Laboratory undertakes a certain amount of work for the National Weights and Measures Laboratory. I am sure that the interests of UK industry would benefit from amalgamation of these two bodies and I believe there would also be a saving of resources.

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4 I quite agree with you that a major part of the task is to change industry's attitudes to the importance of standards but I believe my Department with its close contacts with industry is well suited to tackle this job.

5 I also concur with your view of the complexity of the whole field. I well recognise that in addition to its being a component of industrial policy it has close links with international trade, such as the Article 100 harmonisation programme and with consumer protection, in areas such as consumer safety and metrication. I would like to make it quite clear that I am not questioning existing Departmental responsibility for any of those subjects. I do, however, believe that the Department of Industry has the most vital interest in improving standards and quality and I hope that you will agree that it would be right to examine the question of Departmental responsibility for overall policy on standards and quality and for the National Weights and Measures Laboratory.

6 I thought it would be right to let you have my views in advance of our discussion with the Prime Minister.

7 I have also seen your further letter of 10 December suggesting an ad hoc group chaired by Tony Eden to follow up the remaining parts of the MISC 14 remit. I agree that such a group should be set up immediately without prejudice to the resolution of the question of departmental responsibility. My Department will be represented by Mr C J Farrow.

8 I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, members of MISC 14 and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

not correct - requested
Yours ever
Patel

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