

Ref. A083/0783

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet: Parliamentary Affairs: Cost of Parliament

BACKGROUND

A During the Cabinet's discussion on 16 December (CC(82) 53rd
B Conclusions, Minute 8) of the Chief Secretary's memorandum about Civil Service manpower after 1984 (C(82) 40), some Ministers expressed concern at what was said to be the very large and growing volume of Parliamentary Questions and letters from Members of Parliament. The Lord Privy Seal was invited to consider what might be done to draw the attention of Parliament and the public to this problem and its effects on departmental costs, efficiency, and staff numbers. She was also invited to consider what steps might be taken to counter these unwelcome trends.

2. The Lord Privy Seal was not specifically asked to make a formal report to the Cabinet, but she would like to refer briefly to the results of her further consideration under Parliamentary Affairs.

3. We understand that her main conclusion is that any assertion that the volume of Parliamentary Questions and letters from MPs is increasing would be open to challenge. The number of Questions has, in fact, fallen slightly in recent months, while the volume of correspondence fluctuates. The Lord Privy Seal will seek the views of other members of the Cabinet on the desirability of some form of public statement on the issue, but her own feeling is against publicity; she would prefer to concentrate on the introduction of more rigorous management procedures to ensure that disproportionate amounts of time were not spent on work generated by MPs. Among the measures which she has in mind are:

- (a) A stricter observance of the present £200 limit on the cost of answering Parliamentary Questions.
- (b) Less readiness to provide a mass of statistical tables and other information unless it is clear that the Member requesting it has a genuine need for it.



- (c) A more selective approach to the provision of often very expensive background briefing for Select Committees.
- (d) Cutting off repetitive and unproductive correspondence with MPs at an earlier stage.

HANDLING

4. After the Lord Privy Seal has made her remarks, you may wish to ask the Lord President for his comments about the best way of combining tact and efficiency, particularly in relation to approaches from Members on the Government side. Suggestions for detailed improvements in the present arrangements for handling work created by Parliament are probably best pursued separately by the Management and Personnel Office with a view to issuing further guidance to Departments in due course.

CONCLUSION

5. Subject to any points made in discussion, the Cabinet might conclude that:

- (a) no formal announcement should be made of the Government's intention to look more critically in the future at the cost of handling Parliamentary Questions, correspondence, and other work generated by Members of Parliament; but that
- (b) the Lord Privy Seal should arrange for the issue of further guidance to Departments on this issue.

You did not want her to do this: if it is to be done at official level, you may want to emphasise that it should be very carefully drafted in case it leaks.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

9 March 1983

PRIME MINISTER

At the last Cabinet meeting before Christmas there was a discussion about reductions in Civil Service manpower. In the course of this discussion some members of the Cabinet expressed concern about the large and apparently growing volume of Parliamentary Questions and letters from Members of Parliament and the public. The Lord Privy Seal was asked to consider what might be done to draw the attention of Parliament and the public to the costs of answering these Questions and letters. Attached is a draft minute which Janet Young has in mind to circulate to Cabinet.

I am not sure this would achieve anything. The graph attached to her minute shows that there has actually been a slight decrease in the number of Parliamentary Questions since you took office. There is also apparently little evidence of a general increase in the numbers of MPs' letters. Lady Young's minute makes some suggestions for reducing the costs of answering letters and PQs, but these are not new suggestions, and Ministers should already be aware of them.

If Lady Young's minute were circulated, it could well leak. The Opposition could argue that the Government were unwilling to provide the same service as the previous Labour Government. They might point out that the minute does little to acknowledge the rights of Members to question Ministers. Although the estimated cost of £16 million a year of dealing with all letters and PQs from Members of both Houses and the general public is fairly high, the Opposition would argue that this is a small price to pay for democracy.

If Lady Young feels that she must fulfil her remit, I would be inclined to suggest that she report orally to Cabinet, and:

- (a) point out that the latest figures available do not show any significant increase in the number of PQs and letters;
- (b) remind Ministers briefly of the ways in which they can reduce

the costs of answering letters and PQs.

Alternatively you may feel that there is no need for the Lord Privy Seal to raise this matter in Cabinet again.

WM

I do not think the half-minute
would go down well with colleagues.

Perhaps Lady Young would answer orally
not

25 February 1983

From the Private Secretary

CONFIDENTIAL



Management and Personnel Office

Whitehall London SW1A 2AZ

Telephone 01-273 } 4400
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25 February 1983

Tim Flesher Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Dear Tim,

PQs AND MPs' LETTERS

The Lord Privy Seal was asked at Cabinet on 18 December 1982 to consider what might be done to draw the attention of Parliament and the public to the large and growing volume of PQs and MPs' letters, and possible steps to counter the trend.

I enclose a draft minute which the Lord Privy Seal has in mind to send to the Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues. Before circulating this formally, she would be glad to know whether the Prime Minister has any comments on it.

*Yours sincerely,
Mary Brown*

MRS M E BROWN

CONFIDENTIAL

DRAFT MINUTE FROM THE LORD PRIVY SEAL

PRIME MINISTER

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS AND LETTERS FROM MPs

At Cabinet on 16 December I was asked to consider what might be done to draw the attention of Parliament and the public to the large and growing volume of Parliamentary Questions and letters from Members of Parliament, and the effects on cost, efficiency and staff numbers; and what steps might be taken to counter these trends.

The Facts

There has actually been a slight decrease in the number of PQs since we took office. However, as the graph at Annex A shows, this followed a significant rise in the mid-1970s. The only similar totals for MPs' letters are for 1980 which were collected for the "cost of Parliament" exercise (Annex B). I know that you did not want that exercise to become a large cost in itself so we confined our present research to a sample of Departments only, and to figures that were readily available. But, in the very few Departments which did have consistent figures going back 10 years, there was little evidence of a general increase, although there had been large fluctuations when particular issues came into prominence.

Nevertheless, the numbers are large and impose significant costs. The 1980 estimates were over £1m a year for PQs, over £7m for letters from MPs and Peers, and some £8m for letters from members of the public. I suspect these are on the low side, and they certainly take no account of the considerable demands on Ministers' time.

Underlying Reasons

You and other colleagues in the Commons will be better able than I to judge how far the pressures which MPs put on Ministers arise from pressures put on MPs themselves; and how far they are made on MPs' own initiative. But certainly what may broadly be called "political" awareness among the general public has greatly increased in the last 20 years. The causes are many. They include the greater involvement of the State in the lives of ordinary citizens, the growing tendency of people to form pressure groups, the rise of the various civil rights and consumer rights movements, and the vastly increased impact of the news media. All this means more pressure on the MP from his constituents. I suspect too that many MPs feel that they need to adopt higher profiles in their constituencies and Parliament than they once did.

What can be done?

I conclude from this that, whatever we do, it will not very greatly affect the volume of PQs and letters. I am also

doubtful about the advisability of a general campaign. We can certainly give more publicity in speeches and in replies to Parliamentary Questions to the cost and volumes involved. But this needs to be done carefully and selectively, as and when we have the opportunity. Although some of our Parliamentary colleagues could be receptive, others may regard an approach, however tactful, as an attempt by the Executive to stifle the Legislature. I need hardly say that any initiative we take is capable of misrepresentation by our opponents as seeking to discourage MPs and their constituents from exercising their democratic rights. It would also conflict with our undertaking to make Parliament the centre of public life and to encourage an effective House of Commons.

But controlling the costs of answering PQs and letters is another matter. These are within our control and I believe we can take practical action to save the taxpayer money. Good work has already been done in many Departments on which we can build. For instance:

- a. some Departments with provincial offices have encouraged MPs to take up individual constituents' complaints directly with the local manager concerned. As well as being cheaper, the response is usually quicker and, if something has gone wrong, the effort can

go into putting it right. (Such a development fits well with our general policy of delegating operational responsibility within overall political control, but we must of course be prepared to support the local manager's judgement where necessary);

b. too much effort sometimes goes into comprehensive briefing, both for work on the floor of the House and for Select Committee appearances. We need the policy and the key facts at our fingertips; but we should be willing to say "I do not know but I will find out" on peripheral issues. Again some good progress has been made: for example, the Lord President has dispensed with comprehensive briefing for pre-Recess Adjournment debates;

c. while PQs and MPs' letters are part of the way in which Ministers are accountable to Parliament, we can take a robust attitude to their misuse as a quick and easy means of obtaining information, particularly statistics, which is readily available elsewhere or which is not relevant to our stewardship. This has already been done on some PQs seeking large statistical tables, for example by indicating where the information can be found;

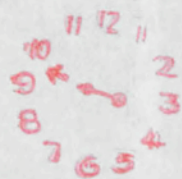
- d. we have a duty to explain our policies. But it is wasteful to give a comprehensive reply to someone whose opinions are unlikely to change. A quick, polite and simple acknowledgement may be just as effective. Perhaps more of the letters handled by our officials on our behalf might be dealt with in this way;

- e. in November we revised the procedures for PQs likely to cost more than £200 to be brought to the Minister's attention before work begins. We all need to look critically at such Questions.

I do not think any general circular to Departments will bring such action about. It falls to us as Ministers in charge of Departments to tell officials what we individually want, ensure we and they are aware of the costs involved, and maintain vigilance on what comes up to us.

I would welcome your views and those of Cabinet colleagues, to whom I am copying this minute. A copy also goes to Sir Robert Armstrong.7

26 FEB 1983

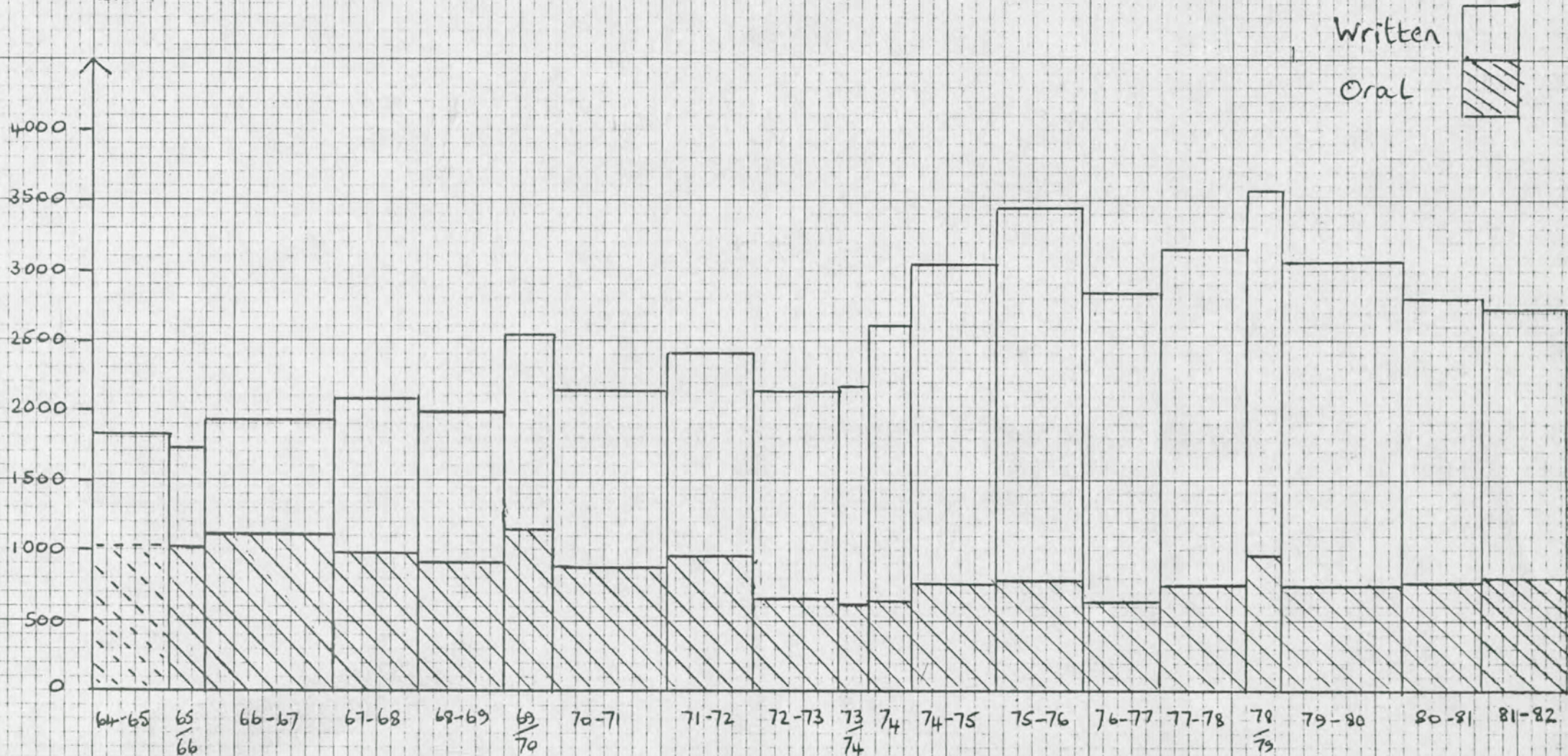


Number of Parliamentary Questions

ANNEX A

House of Commons: monthly, 1965-82

AVERAGE NO OF PQs
ON ORDER PAPER PER
MONTH



Source: House of Commons records
 Drawn by: MEI/MPO 24 May 82
 Updated by MEI/MPO 18.1.83

PARLIAMENTARY
 SESSIONS AND LENGTH

ANNEX A (Continued)

The total cost of all Parliamentary Questions was estimated in 1980 at about £1.230 million a year.

The average cost of Parliamentary Questions was announced to be, in July 1982, £60 for an oral answer and £37 for a written answer (Hansard, 13 July 1982 col 349).

DEPARTMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE IN 1980: SUMMARY OF REPLIES

DEPARTMENT	LETTERS FROM MP's, PEERS AND PRIVY COUNSELLORS		LETTERS FROM OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC	
	MINISTERIAL REPLIES	OFFICIAL(*) REPLIES	MINISTERIAL REPLIES	OFFICIAL(*) REPLIES
HOME OFFICE	21,000	(minimal)	700	43,300 [0], 1000 [PS]
PCO	7,930	2,170	1,760	1,030
HM TREASURY	1,400	-	1,200	5,200
INLAND REVENUE	3,945	-	150	3,500
HM CUSTOMS	2,634	-	45	902
DNS	150	-	2	150
LORD PRESIDENT	1,700	(insignificant)	120	1,500
LCD	1,434	15	20	6,442 [0]
DEFENCE	6,108	524 [PS]	623	5,267 [0], 433 [PS]
MAPF	3,600	-	600	3,650
TRADE	7,837 [incl PS]	-	4,951 (incl PS)	4,918 [0]
INDUSTRY	3,168	-	4,891	5,995
ENERGY	3,500	500 [PS]	2,300	3,000 [0], 1,400 [PS]
DOE	18,150	(insignificant)	6,900	47,800
TRANSPORT	8,250	(insignificant)	2,200	7,800
DHSS	23,000 [incl public]	(negligible)	(see Column 1)	45,600
SCOTTISH OFFICE	5,140	30	1,880	8,460
DES	6,717	44	2,127	21,729
EMPLOYMENT	5,400	150 [PS]	1,600	6,000 [0]
NIO	4,352	86	606	7,737
WELSH OFFICE	1,530	-	2,334	5,140
TOTALS	136,945	3,519	35,009	235,120 [0], 2,833 [PS]

* No distinction between Private Secretary and other official replies except where otherwise indicated

DEPARTMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE IN 1980: COSTING

BASIS

DHSS findings in the "Cost of Parliament" exercise suggest that a reasonable estimate of the average cost in 1980 of replies sent from Ministers' private offices is £50 and that replies treated officially cost around half that amount. Few departmental returns distinguished between Private Secretary and other official replies. It has therefore been assumed for costing purposes that, except where otherwise stated, all official replies to letters from MP's, Peers and Privy Counsellors were signed by Private Secretaries, and that all official replies to letters from other members of the public were signed by other officials. On that basis, the cost of departmental correspondence in 1980 was of the order of £15 million in round terms, calculated as below.

COSTING

1.	<u>Letters from MPs, Peers and Privy Counsellors</u>		
	a. <u>Ministerial replies</u>		
	136,945 @ £50		= £6,847,250
	b. <u>Official replies</u>		
	3,519 @ £50		= £ 175,950
2.	<u>Letters from other members of the public</u>		
	a. <u>Ministerial replies</u>		
	35,009 @ £50		= £1,750,450
	b. <u>Official replies</u>		
	235,120 @ £25		= £5,878,000
	2,833 @ £50		= £ 141,650
	<u>Total estimated cost: £14,793,300</u>		



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

28 February 1983

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS AND LETTERS FROM MPs

Thank you for your letter of 25 February to Tim Flesher. As I said on the telephone, the Prime Minister would prefer the Lord Privy Seal to fulfil her remit from Cabinet by reporting orally. The Prime Minister feels she should make two main points: point out that the latest figures available do not show any significant increase in the number of PQs and letters; and remind Ministers briefly of the ways in which they can reduce the costs of answering letters and PQs.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

W. F. S. RICKETT

Mrs. M.E. Brown,
Lord Privy Seal's Office.