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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Principal Private Secretary*

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Thank you for your minute of 29 July about the handling of the response to the Defence Select Committee's reports about Westland.

I have not shown your minute to the Prime Minister, but I think that the arrangements described in your minute for preparing the responses to the two reports are on the right lines.

I strongly agree that the response to the Select Committee's report on Government decision-making should be constructed so as to avoid retelling the story of events discussed in the Select Committee's report. Clearly it is essential to avoid another round of evidence taking and reports. This means, I think, that the responses should avoid giving further information of the events of last January.

None of this need prevent a disquisition on the question of accountability and the role of civil servants in relation to Select Committees, etc. But such material should be put in general terms and not related to the particular circumstances of the Defence Committee's inquiry. I agree, too, that at this stage two separate responses should be prepared, though in the event, it may be decided to brigade them into one Government response to the two reports. It is possible that the response may also have to cover the outstanding report of

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. Murdo Maclean is finding out its publication date. It would clearly be highly convenient if the Government's response to that document could be published at the same time as the responses to the Defence Select Committee's two reports.

I hope that drafts of the responses can be available with us by, say, about the middle of September. You are certainly right in wanting their publication to be kept clear of Party Conferences.

Finally some thoughts on the Parliamentary handling of the report. One possibility is for the Government's response to be published in one document which, while not brushing aside the Government decision-making aspects, concentrates on policies of helicopter procurement and industrial aspects. This response would be presented to Parliament by the Secretaries of State for Defence and Trade and Industry, though it may prove impossible to avoid adding the Prime Minister's name. If a debate is inevitable, there would be much to be said for the Government offering time in the spill-over period. The Secretary of State for Defence would open the debate and speak mainly about helicopter procurement, making some passing references to the comments on Government decision-making aspects. A Trade and Industry Minister could wind. The business managers will, no doubt, be advising on all this in due course.

I am sending copies of this minute to the Private Secretaries to the Lord President, Lord Privy Seal and Chief Whip.

N.L.W.

N.L. WICKS

31 July 1986

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