

PRIME MINISTER

You might like to see the attached statement about Questions procedure which the Speaker made this afternoon. You will see that no change is proposed in the arrangements for Prime Minister's Questions, but he has taken powers to kill off open Questions to other Ministers. There was some doubt about this decision from the Opposition and Michael Foot said that they were happy if everybody was clear that we really did mean an experimental period rather than a permanent change.

Dennis Skinner was present in the House again, and was warmly welcomed from all sides. The Speaker said that it was very nice to see him, although he was not quite sure about hearing him. When Mr. Skinner rose to comment (adversely) on the Speaker's statement, someone behind him shouted "Sit down now Dennis, while your credit is still good". If he questions you tomorrow, I hope that you will offer your own welcome to him.

Ms

23 April 1980

Draft Statement for Mr. Speaker on Open Questions.

I reminded the House recently (17th April) of my concern at the way in which Question Time is being changed by open Questions. By such Questions I mean Questions which give no indication to the House of the real Question which the hon. Member seeks to ask. Examples of such Questions are, 'when the Minister expects to meet the Chairman of a particular Nationalised Industry', or 'of a particular trade organisation', or 'the Director of Public Prosecutions or 'when the Minister expects to meet his colleagues in the E.E.C.'. We have Questions listed on our Order Paper so that the House itself is given notice of Questions that are to be raised, and so that considered answers can be prepared to them.

The whole House knows that the open Question is allowed for Prime Minister's Questions because of the desire of Members to table Questions that will not be transferred to other Ministers. I confess to the House that I feel embarrassed when I see as many as twenty or more Questions on the Order Paper all asking about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day. It would be far better for us if the hon. Members concerned tabled the actual Question they wish to ask the Prime Minister, but since the special problem of Prime Minister's Question time has been considered by the House relatively recently, I do not propose any change of practice in relation to it.

When it comes to other Ministers, however, I see no reason why hon. Members should not put on the Order Paper the Question they intend to ask, or at least disclose its subject matter, so that the whole House may know the topic that is being raised. In all honesty, I have to say that very often a supplementary Question to an open Question turns out to be one that could not have been accepted by the Table Office, and is therefore an abuse of our rules. In an effort to protect the House itself I therefore propose for an experimental period to extend the practice I introduced in March 1978 for Questions to Departmental Ministers about their engagements for the day. When a Question about a Minister's meetings appears on the Order Paper without stating reasonably precisely the purpose of the meeting, I shall allow it to be called and for the Minister to reply, but I shall not then call the hon. Member concerned to ask a supplementary Question. If the subject matter is indicated in the Question, then supplementary questioning will be confined to that subject.

If, in consequence of this action, I find that other open Questions are being devised, I shall, of course, consider applying the same restriction to them. The new practice will be applied to Questions tabled after today.

As I see it, if such action is not taken at this stage, our Question Time will have its character changed without the House itself having consciously decided that the old system of giving notice of Questions should be pushed aside.

I hope that I have the support of the House in the course that I have outlined.

QUESTIONS TO MINISTERS

Mr. Speaker : I have a short statement to make.

I reminded the House recently of my concern at the way in which Question Time is being changed by open questions. By such questions I mean questions which give no indication to the House of the real question which the hon. Gentleman seeks to ask. Examples of such questions—and we have had them today—involve asking when the Minister expects to meet the chairman of a particular nationalised industry, of a particular trade organisation, the Director of Public Prosecutions, or his colleagues in the EEC.

Questions are listed on the Order Paper so that the House itself is given notice of questions that are to be raised and so that considered answers to them can be prepared. The whole House knows that the open question is allowed for Prime Minister's questions because of the desire of Members to table questions that will not be transferred to other Ministers. I confess to the House that I feel embarrassed when I see as many as 20 or more questions on the Order Paper all asking about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day. It would be far better for us all if the hon. Members concerned table the actual question which they wished to ask the Prime Minister.

Since the special problems of Prime Minister's Question Time have been considered by the House relatively recently, I do not propose any change in practice in relation to it. When it comes to other Ministers, however, I see no reason why hon. Members should not put on the Order Paper the question that they intend to ask, or at least disclose its subject matter so that the whole House may know the topic that is being raised. In all honesty I have to say to the House that very often a supplementary question to an open question turns out to be one which could not have been accepted by the Table Office and is, therefore, an abuse of our rules.

In an effort to protect the House, I propose, for an experimental period, to extend the practice that I introduced in March 1978 for questions to departmental Ministers asking them about their

engagements for the day. When a question about a Minister's meetings with various persons or organisations appears on the Order Paper without its purpose being stated reasonably precisely, I shall allow it to be called and for the Minister to reply but I shall not call any supplementary questions. If the subject matter is indicated in the question, supplementary questions will be confined to that subject.

If in consequence of this action I find that other open questions are being devised, I shall consider applying the same restrictions to them. The new practice will be applied to questions tabled after today.

As I see it, if such action is not taken at this stage the character of our Question Time will be changed without the House itself having consciously decided that the old system of giving notice of questions should be pushed aside. I hope that I have the support of the House in the course that I have outlined.

Mr. Cryer : On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you please examine a matter which arises as a result of your statement? The general problem arises because of the difficulty of pinning down Government Departments. I know that you, Mr. Speaker, want to protect the rights of Members to ensure that the Government are accountable.

Since you have, in effect, narrowed the opportunity of asking questions, will you also examine the way in which Government Departments narrow their opportunities to provide replies and the blocking mechanism which Government Departments put on answers by replying "No"? Such a reply means that it is impossible to table a similar question in the Table Office for three months, which eradicates the possibility of making the Government accountable for that period. All Governments use that system consciously. If we are to be inhibited to some degree, you, Mr. Speaker, should examine the matter which I have put to you.

Mr. Speaker : The hon. Gentleman misunderstood my statement if he thought that I was talking about pinning the Government down. There was no such reference in my statement. I remind the House that I am expected to be the guardian of our rules and Standing Orders. I can see a danger that the whole character of

Mr. Bruce-Gardyne : Should not another hard look be taken at the role of the Pay Research Unit? Since the Government rightly set cash limits, based on their calculations on what the community can afford, is it not thoroughly unfortunate that the Pay Research Unit should come forward with solutions that can only lead directly to redundancies?

Mr. Channon : I understand my hon. Friend's view. I must point out to him, as I did on an earlier occasion, that the Conservative Party election manifesto said that we would reconcile pay research with cash limits. That has been the Government's policy and one that I have been trying to implement. I take note of what my hon. Friend says.

Civil Service Staff-Side

55. **Mr. Straw** asked the Minister for the Civil Service, when next he will meet representatives of the Civil Service Staff Side.

Mr. Channon : I met them yesterday, and I am sure that we shall meet again soon.

Mr. Straw : If the Civil Service is reduced by 70,000 would the Minister welcome that?

Mr. Channon : I should welcome the smallest Civil Service that the country can have which can carry out the tasks which Parliament sets it. I am certain that a smaller and even more efficient civil service would be in the national in-

terest and in the interests of the Civil Service.

Mr. Michael Brown : Will my hon. Friend study the replies to a series of written questions to various Government Departments which I have tabled which, while bearing out the good results that he announced this afternoon, show that some Departments are still lagging sadly behind his requirements?

Mr. Channon : Each Department varies. I certainly do not wish to criticise any individual Department. I shall take note of what my hon. Friend says and bear it in mind when considering future policy.

Mr. Cryer : Will the Minister be able to assure the Civil Service Staff Side that before highly-paid jobs in industry or public corporations are offered to senior civil servants such as Mr. Ron Dearing, they will be advertised throughout the Civil Service? May we have assurances that such jobs will not be given to people in a clique working with a particular Secretary of State, but that the jobs will be brought into the open and advertised either generally or throughout the Civil Service?

Mr. Channon : The usual practice for the appointment of the chairmen of nationalised industries will be followed by those of my right hon. Friends who are responsible for appointments. The practice has not varied under successive Governments.

Question Time will change unless this course is followed. I propose to follow it until the House instructs me otherwise.

Mr. Dykes: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that there will be a wide welcome for your proposal. There is a special characteristic and possible problem in respect of EEC questions after the Foreign Affairs questions slot. Specific subjects are bound to be transferred to the relevant Departments because of the way in which the constitutional relationship between the Government and the EEC operates. There is bound to be a wider aspect in EEC questions because of the Foreign Office spokesman's role in dealing with constitutional matters relating to the EEC.

Mr. Skinner rose—

Mr. Speaker: I shall call the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) in a moment. I welcome him back, on St. George's Day.

Whilst I am preparing myself to call the hon. Gentleman, I must tell the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. Dykes) that the subject of open questions about the EEC was one matter which I considered carefully. Such questions were asked last week. Neither the Minister nor the House knew what topic was coming up. The topics ranged between Afghanistan, the Olympic Games and Iraq. The House is entitled to have notice of the questions which are to be asked.

Mr. Skinner: I have left the dragon outside!

On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I think that you have not looked at the matter as closely as you should, especially in relation to the Common Market and the chairmen of nationalised industries. One of the problems is that we cannot ask relatively narrow questions about nationalised industries because of arguments about day-to-day administration. One of the reasons for questions about meetings with the chairmen of British Rail, the National Coal Board and other nationalised industries is to overcome the possibility of such questions being stopped at the Table Office. There will be difficulties if we are not allowed to table that type of question about nationalised industries. The matter needs another look.

Mr. Speaker: May I say, before responding to the hon. Gentleman's question, that I am glad that he is in his old form. I mean that. I am very glad to see him. I do not say anything about hearing him, but seeing him—certainly, yes.

Question 2 today, an open question, drew supplementary questions dealing with salaries on the railways, electrification on the railways, freight in Cornwall, "Transport 2000", rural transport, cash limits and the question of transport in Wales. Those questions, or some of them, could have been put on the Order Paper, and, if they could not, they were out of order.

Mr. St. John-Stevas: May I, Mr. Speaker, express the gratitude of, I think, most hon. Members for your statement today, because I believe that the open question at Prime Minister's Question Time has led to abuse. Both the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition and the present Prime Minister have attempted to return the tradition to the more specific question. The more specific a question is, the more Ministers are in fact pinned down by it. I think that there would be a great danger to the tradition of our Question Time if the open question became the norm for all questions to Ministers, and I believe that the vast majority of Members will be most grateful for the early action which you have taken.

Mr. Foot: While thanking you for the ruling or suggestion which you have given to the House, Mr. Speaker, may I say that some of us have some sympathy with what has been said by my hon. Friends, and one of the dangers of jumping out of the frying pan is that one may land in the fire. One of the problems is that these developments have occurred precisely because of real difficulties, and I therefore urge you, Mr. Speaker, since you have yourself said that there shall be an experimental period, that if you find that the alternative abuse of Ministers being able to transfer questions or to escape their responsibilities arises, we should have the matter looked at by the Procedure Committee. Indeed, perhaps the Committee ought to look at it in any case. I hope, Mr. Speaker, that while we conduct the experiment which you have asked for, we shall look at the other possibilities, and I urge that that should go to the Procedure Committee.

Mr. Spriggs: I thank you for your statement, Mr. Speaker, but may I draw your attention to the other side of the coin in relation to Departments and Ministers? I have recently put down questions to Ministers and been told in reply that, because of the disproportionate costs of finding out the information which I required, they were not able to give me the answer. When I have asked the Ministers concerned to tell me what the costs were to which they referred, they still did not give me the answer. Would you have a look at that side of the coin, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: I am much obliged to the House for the way in which it has responded. I suggest that we have this experimental period at least until the spring bank holiday, which, I think, is about five weeks away. We shall then look at it again, but I hope that it will work in the interests of the House.

IRAN

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Douglas Hurd): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I shall make a statement on yesterday's decision by the Foreign Ministers of the members of the European Community concerning Iran. I am arranging for a copy of the text of the approved communiqué to be published in the *Official Report*.

As the House will recall, my right hon. and noble Friend and his colleagues had adopted a decision in Lisbon on 10 April which was, in effect, a last appeal to the authorities in Iran to release the hostages in conformity with international law. Our ambassadors in Tehran were instructed to convey this appeal to the Iranian President and to request him to name the date and method by which the hostages would be released. They did so on 12 April. Mr. Bani Sadr's reply was unsatisfactory. The most he would say was that he hoped that a decision on the future of the hostages would be taken by the new Iranian Parliament when it had been elected and established. While holding out the prospect that visits to the hostages might be arranged, he could give no firm assurance as to when the Parliament might meet, or whether it could be relied upon to act as he hoped.

When this matter came up in this House and in another place on 14 April, the mood of the House was unmistakable, and the phrase "the utmost solidarity with the United States" was used from the Benches on both sides. There was a general feeling that diplomatic methods had, for the time being at least, been exhausted and that the time had come to find some more concrete and far-reaching way of expressing our abhorrence at the continued defiance of the rules of international behaviour and the opinions of the civilised world.

The House will I hope, find this mood reflected in the decision adopted yesterday in Luxembourg. In accordance with a suggestion made last week by the United Kingdom, it was decided to proceed in two stages. In the first stage, the Nine will put into effect to the extent that they are not in force already certain measures mainly of a political nature. We shall reduce still further our embassy staffs in