



10 DOWNING STREET

*Parliament*  
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From the Principal Private Secretary

8 January 1982

RESTRICTED

*Dear Private Secretary,*

The Prime Minister is anxious to improve the presentation of the Government's policies. I am therefore writing, on her instructions, to suggest some practical ways in which this might be achieved.

A | The Prime Minister and the Lord President both like to have the opportunity personally to comment on Parliamentary statements and particularly important Answers. But to do this they need time, and Departments should accordingly aim to get drafts to the No 10 Private and Press Offices and to the Lord President's Office early on the morning of the day before the announcement.

B | Second, Departments should ensure that when draft statements and Answers are sent to No 10 and the Lord President they are accompanied by background notes which identify the likely points of attack and suggest how those attacks can best be met. It is essential that before any Department makes an announcement, the lines of attack should have been anticipated and a means of securing the most positive presentation should have been devised.

C | Third - and at a more routine level -, Departments should as a matter of course identify issues which are likely to give rise to problems with the media and should ensure that their Press Offices and the No 10 Press Office are put in the best position to meet the problems and at the same time to exploit any opportunities for presenting matters in a positive and favourable light. For maximum effect, guidance should reach the No 10 Press Office by 10.45 am and 3.45 pm each day. If No 10 learn about a departmental problem for the first time through a press inquiry, we are not best placed to handle it to the Government's advantage.

D | Finally, it goes without saying that Departments should pay particular attention to items of good news and should see that they are put over with vigour. The Prime Minister is herself ready to give publicity to items of good news, for example, at Question Time and in speeches. She also wants Departments to give her Press Office positive material it can draw on on a day-to-day basis. (I should, however, caution Departments about the practice of early



release of Written Answers. In the light of recent exchanges in the House, new guidance will be circulated shortly).

I should be grateful if you could ensure that the above points are borne constantly in mind in your Department. If there is one aspect of them I would single out for particular mention, it is the importance of giving departmental Press Offices and the No 10 Press Office as much notice of proposed announcements as possible: good presentation needs time for preparation.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to all members of the Cabinet, the Attorney General and the Chief Whip and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely,

Alwi Whinn.



*Parliament*

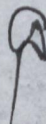
26 January 1982

Prime Minister's Questions

We had a word about this the other day. I enclose a draft minute which incorporates the points which we here think need to be made. I have done it in the form of a minute which you could send to departments. But I have chosen that form only to try to save you time. It is of course entirely up to you how you use the material. The main objective is to gear FCO briefing more closely to the present form of Prime Minister's Question time - there have been certain changes in recent months which may not have been brought to the attention of your Parliamentary Unit.

AJC

Brian Fall, Esq.,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.





DRAFT MINUTE

Prime Minister's Questions

Prime Minister's Question Time each Tuesday and Thursday is a major Parliamentary/political event. It is important that the briefing supplied by Departments matches No. 10 requirements.

Guidance is set out in DSP, Volume 5, Chapter 3. While this remains generally valid, it is now a little out of date in respect of preparation for the Prime Minister's Oral Questions. This is because the Questions reached on Tuesdays and Thursdays are now almost invariably "open" Questions, ie Questions about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day which allow the questioner and other MPs to ask supplementary Questions about any topical issue of domestic or foreign concern. The bulk of the material now requested by No. 10 for Prime Minister's Question Time is required to deal with that situation, and Departments should therefore note in particular the following points:

a) For any topic, the Prime Minister requires a "line to take" (or, in the rare case of a substantive Oral Question which will be reached, a draft answer). This should normally consist of a statement in plain, politically sensitive and unevasive language, of the Government's attitude or policy towards the issue raised. Ideally, it should take the form of three or four short sentences, suitable for easy oral delivery.

/ b)



b) The Prime Minister likes to make her responses as substantive as possible. Devices such as referring the questioner to an earlier answer are not appropriate.

c) Where No 10 specify that briefing should take a particular form and be received by a stated time, it is important that these requirements are met. In the majority of cases, No 10 will ask for material either the night before Prime Minister's Question Time, or on the morning itself. This must reach No 10 by noon unless, for overriding reasons, the Department have negotiated a later timing with the Prime Minister's Office. Subject to the terms of No 10's request, briefing should be confined to a "line to take" together with relevant factual information which can be worked into an answer in the light of the specific Question raised in the House. In one or two instances recently, briefing has been both too lengthy and too late for the Prime Minister's use.

d) Where Notes for Supplementaries and/or Background Notes have been requested, they should be concise. As the Prime Minister must prepare for Supplementary Questions on any domestic or foreign issue of the day, she inevitably calls for briefing material on a wide variety of topics. Background Notes which are too lengthy and detailed cannot be read in the time available.



DRAFT MINUTE

Prime Minister's Questions

Prime Minister's Question Time each Tuesday and Thursday is a major Parliamentary/political event. It is important that the briefing supplied by Departments matches No. 10 requirements.

Guidance is set out in DSP, Volume 5, Chapter 3. It remains valid, but the following points in particular should be noted:

- a) Draft answers to Oral Questions should normally consist of a statement in plain, politically sensitive and unevasive language, of the Government's attitude or policy towards the Question raised. Ideally, they should take the form of three or four short sentences, suitable for easy oral delivery.
- b) The answers should be as substantive as possible. Devices such as referring the questioner to an earlier answer are not appropriate.
- c) Where No. 10 specify that briefing should take a particular form and be received by a stated time, it is important that these requirements are met.

/d) In



- d) In particular, "last minute briefing" (DSP, Volume 5, Chapter 3.6) must reach No. 10 by noon on the Tuesday or Thursday in question and should be brief. In one or two instances recently briefing has been both too <sup>lengthy</sup> ~~indecisive~~ and too late for the Prime Minister's use.
- e) Notes for Supplementaries should take a similar form. Both they and Background Notes should be concise. (Since Questions may be put to the Prime Minister without notice on any domestic or foreign issue of the day, the amount of briefing material provided is inevitably very large. Background Notes which are too lengthy and detailed cannot be read in the time available).

26 January, 1982



## CHAPTER 3

## PRIME MINISTER'S PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

## 3.1 PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME

The Prime Minister answers oral PQs in the House of Commons each Tuesday and Thursday at 3.15 pm for 15 minutes. MPs use Prime Minister's Question Time as a means of examining and criticising the broad range of the Government's policies and the Prime Minister has to be prepared to answer a much wider range of Supplementaries than a Departmental Minister.

*Mr Coles (No 10)*  
*We spoke. This is the bare - and I am told that there is no other relevant text.*

## 3.2 FCO ADVICE ON ANSWERS

3.2.1 The FCO is required to provide advice to No 10 for use in answering PQs addressed to the Prime Minister on subjects which concern the FCO. The Parliamentary Questions Section at No 10 tells the Parliamentary Unit specifically what advice or briefing is required and this is passed on to Departments, who are also notified of the date and time by which it should reach the Parliamentary Unit. Dockets are prepared by the Parliamentary Unit in the usual way (see para 2.6.1); green labels are used to distinguish Prime Minister's PQs. Any queries on these requests (eg if clarification is required, or if it appears inappropriate for the FCO to provide the advice) should be raised with the Parliamentary Unit without delay. There is, however, no possibility of varying requests for full sets of Notes for Supplementaries, as Supplementary questions may be very wide-ranging.

*8 Jan 2011*

3.2.2 In preparing briefing for the Prime Minister, Departments should bear in mind that PQs to the Prime Minister should not be taken too literally. Supplementary material needs to range somewhat beyond the apparent narrow terms of individual PQs, and concentrate on any topical issues of political interest within the broad field of the question. Departments should not assume that No 10 have retained any knowledge of a subject from previous PQs, but should draft each time afresh.

3.2.3 Material should be submitted in good time in the usual way through an Under-Secretary, after clearance with other Ministries concerned. Deadlines are set as late as possible. It is important, therefore, that Departments should ensure that the material is complete and in the correct form, especially with the last minute briefing (see para 3.6); there is often no time for review in the Parliamentary Unit and return to Departments for correction.

3.2.4 It is important that deadlines should be strictly observed in respect of all material prepared for No. 10. The Prime Minister requires all briefing for parliamentary occasions, including draft answers to PQs, to be seen and personally approved by the Cabinet Minister concerned. The Private Office and/or the Parliamentary Unit ensure that this is done through the Secretary of State or the Lord Privy Seal as appropriate.

## 3.3 QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER

3.3.1 The Department concerned will be asked to provide a draft answer unless No 10 have specifically agreed to draft the answer themselves. Only the draft typed on the PQ docket is required in the Parliamentary Unit.

3.3.2 Notes for Supplementaries, if they are requested by No 10, should be phrased specifically for the Prime Minister in words that can be read out in the House. They should be in short sentences and in the first person. The Notes should be typed on the special blue paper used for Notes for Supplementaries for FCO PQs, with brief headings to identify each subject and typed



in 1½ spacing. The original and 3 copies should be sent to the Parliamentary Unit.

- 3.3.3 Notes for Supplementaries should be specific. A Note should not say, eg simply that a meeting was useful, but should say in which respects it was useful; if the Note says, eg "We are satisfied with our facilities at X", the background note must spell out what those facilities are. Special attention should be given to MPs' known interests.
- 3.3.4 A background note must always be provided. It should contain any classified or other information which the Prime Minister needs to bear in mind in considering the draft answer and in handling the PQ and Supplementaries in the House. Wherever possible, it should be confined to a single page and contain only essential supporting information. These notes are normally submitted to the Prime Minister; they should therefore be clearly legible and require no editing or retyping. As No 10 will not normally see the minute submitting the draft answer and other material within the FCO, all information required by the Prime Minister should be included in the background note. The original and 3 copies should be sent to the Parliamentary Unit.
- 3.3.5 References and supporting documents should be provided as Departments judge necessary. These should be listed on a separate sheet of good quality size A4 paper (and not listed on the Notes for Supplementaries or the background note). Two copies of each reference or document are required, flagged, in the Parliamentary Unit.

#### 3.4 QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN ANSWER

- 3.4.1 The Department concerned will be asked to provide a draft answer unless No 10 have specifically agreed to draft the answer themselves. Only the draft typed on the PQ docket is required in the Parliamentary Unit.
- 3.4.2 A short background note is required, except in the rare event that the draft answer is completely self-explanatory (See para 3.3.4). The original and three copies should be sent to the Parliamentary Unit.
- 3.4.3 References should be provided as necessary (See para 3.3.5). Two copies of each reference, flagged, are required in the Parliamentary Unit.

#### 3.5 GENERAL BACKGROUND BRIEFING

- 3.5.1 This material should in general take the normal form of Notes for Supplementaries and background notes (See para 3.3.2). The original and 3 copies should be sent to the Parliamentary Unit. Unlike material provided for specific PQs, general background briefing material will usually be carried forward by No 10 from one Prime Minister's Question Time to the next, with necessary amendments to keep it up to date, until No 10 decide to omit it. The deadline for submission to the Parliamentary Unit is noon on Mondays. Departments need not necessarily re-write material which requires little amendment to bring it up to date; an amended photocopy of the version previously provided will be acceptable. But when substantial (or numerous minor) amendments are necessary, material should be re-typed.
- 3.5.2 Departments must ensure that material submitted on a Monday remains up-to-date for both the following Tuesday and Thursday Prime Minister's Question Time. If changes become necessary,



Departments should advise the Parliamentary Unit immediately by telephone and submit amendments as soon as possible.

### 3.6 LAST MINUTE BRIEFING

- 3.6.1 No 10 ask for this material on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Usually only up to one page of Notes for Supplementaries and/or a short background note are needed. Brevity and speed are essential, as the firm deadline for arrival at No 10 is noon the same day. The original only is required in the Parliamentary Unit.
- 3.6.2 Requests from No 10 for last minute briefing are relayed immediately to Departments by telephone by the Parliamentary Unit, which is equipped to transmit briefs to No 10 without delay. Departments are thus able to use all the available time to produce the material called for and should regard its preparation and timely submission as requiring a very high priority. Where an Under-Secretary needs to be consulted, he should be alerted at an early stage.

### 3.7 EXPENSIVE ANSWERS

Advice that the Prime Minister should decline to provide the information requested in a PQ on the grounds of disproportionate cost must be sent to No 10 so that the Prime Minister may consider in good time whether, nevertheless, either a full or at least a partial answer should be given. The advice should explain enough of the background to enable the Prime Minister to see what the PQ is about and also to assess the difficulties in providing the information.

### 3.8 ADVICE TO NEWS DEPARTMENT

News Department does not receive copies of the draft advices sent to No 10 for the Prime Minister's PQs and as a general rule does not need them. However, from time to time, in answering a PQ, the Prime Minister makes an announcement about some new development or initiative in the field of foreign or Commonwealth affairs and it is essential that Departments inform News Department in advance if such an announcement is likely.





## 10 DOWNING STREET

15 January 1982

Dear Parliamentary Clerk,

There have been a number of staff changes in Parliamentary Branches since we last circulated the Notes for Guidance on the handling of PQs tabled to the Prime Minister, so it may be helpful to you to have the enclosed slightly revised edition as Parliament comes back for a New Year.

The few changes can be found in paragraph 3c, on last minute briefing. I know that we have been making increasing demands on hard-pressed Departments during Tuesday and Thursday mornings. The Prime Minister much appreciates the work that goes in to responding to our requests at short notice. She was very pleased to be able to thank some of you personally last month. But we have been concerned that some of your colleagues in policy branches may have taken longer than they need to produce more material than the Prime Minister can assimilate in the limited time available. I hope that this revised guidance will be helpful all round, and that it may reduce the extent to which we tie up departmental resources on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Our aim is to provide the Prime Minister with concise briefing on topical subjects which she can read over lunch and have with her at Question Time. Given the vast range of subjects on which she might be expected to comment, we have found increasingly that the amount of material requested of Departments has become too unwieldy to fulfil its purpose effectively and a lot of effort can be wasted. Obviously there are times when full notes for supplementaries and background notes are necessary but in the main we shall in future restrict our requests to a line to take and essential background material. It is worth reminding you that the Prime Minister will rarely be asked to give more than one answer on any subject, apart from the main story of the day. That is why we are looking simply for a broad line to take, coupled with hard information which can be worked in if the question takes an unexpected form.

*Yours sincerely*

*Mike Patterson*

All Parliamentary Clerks



compiled, Hansard references or references to Annexes should not be given in the body of the supplementaries or the background note, but should be attached on a separate sheet.

The Parliamentary Section at No 10 will contact Departments on Wednesdays and Fridays to commission briefing on specific Questions which have appeared on the Order Paper that morning, for answer in 13 days time. Material for Tuesday's Questions must reach No 10 by 4 pm on the preceding Friday and material for Thursday's Questions by 4 pm on the preceding Tuesday.

b) General Briefing

This material should in general take the form of notes for supplementaries and a background note. The points made about the form of notes for supplementaries and background notes for specific Questions apply equally to this general background briefing.

c) Last Minute Briefing

Each Tuesday and Thursday morning No 10 will tell Departments as soon as possible (ie after consultation with the Prime Minister) of any last minute briefing which is required. Necessary briefing must arrive at No 10 by 12 noon. It is essential that this deadline be met if the material is to be processed and submitted to the Prime Minister in time for her to read it during lunchtime. Last minute briefing should take the form of one page containing a line to take, in double spacing, and background material on which the Prime Minister may draw freely. This should cover crucial facts and statistics and, where appropriate, rebuttals to common misunderstandings. Essential but classified background material should be attached on a separate sheet. Supplementaries and full background notes should not be provided unless specifically requested by No 10.