

PRIME MINISTER

Written - We are not complaining about Question Time. They are. Ideas for change should come from them. The real answer lies with those who put down Questions. Let others take the Prime Minister's Questions initiative. ms.

I understand that Mr. Speaker has called an initial conference for 1800 tomorrow evening to discuss his concerns about the state of Prime Minister's Question Time. He has apparently invited the Lord President, and I think John Silkin will represent the Opposition. Unless you object, I think I should tell the Lord President's Office that he should say we are obviously open to suggestions, but that he must reserve his position. It is too important to rush this question.

There are of course ways in which Prime Minister's Question Time could be improved, and I think we <sup>might</sup> ~~should~~ try to use this opportunity to make changes, even if the whole subject has to go to Committee on Procedure. My initial thoughts are as follows.

Prime Minister's Question Time fulfils an important function; it allows the House to question the Head of Government on the topics of the moment; and that feature should not be lost. But the present system, whereby you have no notice of the Questions that will be asked, does waste a lot of your time, and imposes considerable burdens and costs on Government Departments. There is also something in the argument that 15 minutes is inadequate for so important an occasion, but I think we must resist calls to increase the amount of time you spend answering Questions in the House each week. The present system is clearly unfair to backbenchers, but we have to maintain the Speaker's discretion and the rights of front bench spokesmen, Privy Counsellors and Party leaders. Finally it is absurd to have a system in which as many as 90 members appear on the Order Paper when only a handful are ever called (which means that all the rest have to receive a written reply which is almost always identical).

/In short,

In short, I think our guiding principles in making any changes should be that the new system:-

- i) should allow Members to raise the topics of the moment;
- ii) should give the Prime Minister some notice of the subjects that Members intend to raise;
- iii) should not increase the calls on the Prime Minister's time; and
- iv) should maintain the Speaker's discretion, and the right of Party leaders, front bench spokesmen and Privy Counsellors, but should give backbenchers as fairer deal.

(v) Should <sup>mean that</sup> ~~to be given~~ <sup>written replies do not have</sup> ~~to each other~~ <sup>to be not</sup> ~~checked~~

One possible system which might meet some of these points follows. It is purely illustrative:-

- a) the Prime Minister should answer Questions for 30 minutes once a week, say at 1500 on Wednesdays. This would be administratively much simpler, and would waste far less of your time, but you may feel that it is important to have the opportunity to speak twice a week for 15 minutes;
- b) Members should be allowed to give notice that they wish to ask Questions of the Prime Minister ten days in advance (as at present), but they should only be required to give notice of their actual Question by 1430 the previous day.
- c) The Question would have to be on a specific subject. Engagements Questions, or other devices to conceal the true subject of the supplementary, would not be accepted by the Table Office;

- d) There would have to be an understanding that the Prime Minister would not transfer Questions. It was to get round this that the engagements Question was devised;
- e) A maximum of twenty Members/Questions would appear on the Order Paper for any day (or ten if there were two 15 minute sessions, rather than one 30 minute session). The rest would be deemed to have been withdrawn. Members would be selected by ballot as at present, but the Speaker might have to have discretion to amend the order so as to obtain a rough balance, or to ensure that individual Members did not appear on consecutive Question Times;
- f) The Speaker would call as few supplementaries as possible, the first from the Member asking the Question. He could restrict the supplementaries to the Member asking the Question plus one, but he would obviously have to have discretion to vary this. In calling supplementaries, the Speaker would naturally bear in mind the <sup>need for</sup> balance, and the rights of front bench spokesmen, Privy Counsellors and Party leaders. (We should not exaggerate the balance that is achieved at the moment. At Question Time today you were asked eight Questions by Opposition Members and four by Conservatives, the time before the figures were ten Opposition to six Conservatives.)

These are only some first thoughts. I would welcome your own views.

WR

1 February 1983

## OPEN QUESTIONS TO THE PRIME MINISTER

1. Indirect or "open" Questions to the Prime Minister first came to notice as a device in Session 1971-72. They were then 10 per cent of all Questions to the Prime Minister. By 1976-77 they had grown to 58 per cent of PM's Questions. The reason generally given for their growth is that they provided a successful way of combating the previous tendency for Prime Ministers to devolve Questions put to them to a Departmental Minister.
2. The issue of "open" Questions to the Prime Minister was last substantively considered by a Procedure Committee in 1976-77 (Fifth Report of the Select Committee on Procedure (Sessional Committee), Session 1976-77). Prime Minister's Question Time had been previously considered by a Select Committee on Parliamentary Questions in 1971-72, which concluded that it was unable to propose any procedural changes that would relieve the current pressures on Prime Minister's Question Time, although they recommended an additional 15 minutes on Thursdays. The Select Committee on Procedure of 1977-78, which had general terms of reference, did not make any recommendations in this field.
3. The Select Committee on Procedure, 1976-77 made the following recommendations:-
  - (1) The Prime Minister should retain for answer by himself more Questions that raise wide or important issues, even if strictly speaking they fall within the responsibilities of a Departmental Minister, on the lines of the proposal contained in the letter from the Prime Minister's Secretary of 18th April (Annex 1).
  - (2) Members should table fewer Questions of the "official visit" or "official engagement" type ("indirect" Questions) and more Questions of the kind the Prime Minister has now said he is prepared to retain.
  - (3) "Indirect" Questions should not be grouped for answer with identical Questions on the paper for that day.

- (4) Mr Speaker should enforce stricter rules of relevance on supplementary questioning arising from "indirect" Questions to the Prime Minister.

Successive Prime Ministers have accepted the first recommendation, but the others seem to have had little effect.

4. In evidence to the Committee the Principal Clerk of the Table Office suggested for consideration two possibilities (paragraphs 28 to 33 of Annex 2 to the report). These were:-

a. that in respect of oral Questions to the Prime Minister the Speaker might be given power to promote "direct" Questions above "indirect" Questions;

and b. that a Question, if drafted in an indirect form, should be ruled out of order.

5. The Committee did not adopt these proposals. They refer (paragraph 7) to "the extreme difficulty of devising a definition of "indirect" Questions that would defeat the ingenuity of Members", and also to the potential value of "indirect" Questions in promoting topicality, spontaneity and flexibility.

6. These reasons - that, assuming the acquiescence of many Members in the present "open forum" character of PM's Question Time, ways will always be found round any procedural restriction - are the usual ones advanced against changing present arrangements. And Prime Ministers may see advantage in the regular "political confrontation" platform which it provides.

7. If it were desired to review the position, the normal method would be to establish a Procedure Committee with a specific remit. The Lord President answered a PQ on Prime Minister's Questions on 28 June last (attached). His predecessor dealt with the matter at Question Time on 25 March (column 1092). The Speaker has made clear on previous occasions his dissatisfaction with the present arrangements.

renewable energy was about one-fifth of what it will be in the coming year. I do not know what interest the hon. Gentleman took in it at that stage, but it is somewhat difficult to accept his criticism today. We have a rolling programme of research into the renewables to arrive at the most promising renewables for use in Britain. The ACCORD report, to which I believe the hon. Gentleman refers, is a further step down that road.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS

### Prime Minister (Questions)

30. Mr. Winnick asked the Lord President of the Council if he will move to appoint a Select Committee to consider extending time for Questions to the Prime Minister.

**The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. John Biffen):** I have no such proposals to make to the House.

**Mr. Winnick:** In view of the many questions to the Prime Minister on the Order Paper, only the first four questioners are likely to have an opportunity to put their supplementary questions. As there is an obvious wish to question the Prime Minister on a whole host of topics, is there not a case for extending the time allocated by, perhaps, five minutes?

**Mr. Biffen:** The situation to which the hon. Gentleman refers derives from the great preference for the open question. If the time were extended by five minutes, that would not greatly alter the present characteristics of Question Time.

**Mr. Stokes:** Will my right hon. Friend continue to stand firm on any extension of Prime Minister's Question Time? It has been harmed by live broadcasting. In spite of the Prime Minister's marvellous answers to all questions, it is not typical of a day's work in the House. There is far more noise during Question Time than at other times.

**Mr. Biffen:** I agree with my hon. Friend.

### Papers (Pagination)

31. Mr. Dubs asked the Lord President of the Council if he will raise in the Services Committee the practice of using Roman, rather than Arabic numerals, in paginating parts of House of Commons papers, especially in Select Committee reports, with a view to standardising on Arabic numerals.

**Mr. Biffen:** I am sure the House of Commons (Services) Committee will be prepared to consider any proposal the hon. Member puts to it on the subject.

**Mr. Dubs:** I am grateful to the Leader of the House for that answer. This is hardly the most burning political issue that is likely to come before the House during this Parliament, but is he aware that it represents a source of confusion to hon. Members, the public and the press? It is often not possible to find a particular page in many Select Committee reports. Will he support the proposal in my question?

**Mr. Biffen:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about some of the difficulties that derive from the present

forms of pagination. While I should like to secure a role as a great reforming Leader of the House, perhaps by obtaining changes in this regard, I should not like to anticipate what might be the conclusions of the House of Commons (Services) Committee when it considers the matter.

**Sir John Biggs-Davidson:** Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that there is no disposition to abandon Roman numerals? They are part of the inheritance of European civilisation.

**Mr. Biffen:** That is the sort of weighty issue that should be considered by the Services Committee and, mercifully, not by me alone.

### Bridge Street Site

32. Mr. Hooley asked the Lord President of the Council whether he has given consideration recently to the Casson report on providing extra accommodation for hon. Members, and the proposed redevelopment of the Bridge Street site.

**Mr. Biffen:** The House of Commons (Services) Committee recently invited the Accommodation and Administration Sub-Committee to look into the possibility of securing the assistance of private funds in the implementation of Sir Hugh Casson's plans.

**Mr. Hooley:** would it not be rather degrading for the House of Commons to depend on private funds for the accommodation that a modern democratic legislature requires? Will the right hon. Gentleman again look at the matter with a view to making proper provision for the British Parliament from the funds provided by the taxpayer for it to do its job?

**Mr. Biffen:** The most prudent course would be to await the report of the Sub-Committee that is considering the problem.

**Sir Anthony Fell:** Is my right hon. Friend aware that if this proliferation of Committees continues, hon. Members will not need any offices?

**Mr. Biffen:** I note that point, although I am not quite sure what conclusion my hon. Friend wishes me to draw.

**Mr. William Hamilton:** Does the Leader of the House realise that if we got rid of the other place our accommodation problems would be solved at a stroke?

**Mr. Biffen:** That is an interesting point of view, but it would be inappropriate to engage in debate on that matter from the Dispatch Box.

**Mr. Chapman:** Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that there could be a considerable advantage in using private investment for such accommodation and that it could be done under a lease—back system? Is he aware that if the choice is between public funds never being made available to provide decent office accommodation and making office accommodation possible through private funds, we would find the latter preferable?

**Mr. Biffen:** Those factors are being considered by the Sub-Committee of the Services Committee.

### Government Publicity

33. Mr. Adley asked the Lord President of the Council what criteria affect the number of staff in his Department who deal with Government publicity.

...bate at some time between the Easter  
...esses?

... is a subject which I think the House  
... debate urgently. I would not like to promise  
... when, but I hope it will be fairly soon.

... Miss Joan Maynard (Sheffield, Brightside): May I  
... draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day  
... motion 328 which has the support of more than 100  
... members?

[That this House condemns Bernard Matthews, the  
... poultry tycoon, and his 18th century attitude to his  
... workers, many of whom are on family income supplement,  
... at rebates and rate rebates; and fully supports his  
... workers who are on official strike in Suffolk and Norfolk,  
... and also their union, the National Union of Agricultural  
... and Allied Workers in the struggle they are conducting for  
... decent living wages, particularly as these workers doubled  
... production in the last 12 months.]

... That motion supports members of my union who are taking  
... industrial action against Bernard Matthews in order to win  
... a decent wage, having doubled production in the last 12  
... months.

... May I remind the right hon. Gentleman and the House  
... that these rural workers have been out on strike for six  
... weeks? That shows their desperation. They have been  
... trying to live on starvation wages of just over £50 a week.  
... Yesterday, Bernard Matthews—the Freddie Laker of the  
... poultry industry—was wining and dining at the Savoy  
... hotel. He can afford a lunch there but he cannot afford to  
... pay our members a decent wage. Is it not high time that  
... the House debated that important matter, or, at least, we  
... had a statement from the Minister of Agriculture?

... Mr. Pym: The House recognises what a difficult  
... dispute this is. It is important, but I do not think that a  
... debate on the subject would help a settlement of the  
... dispute, which everybody wants. It certainly cannot be  
... arranged in the foreseeable future.

... Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will my  
... right hon. Friend try to find time next week or shortly  
... hereafter for a debate on the operation of the British  
... banking system which is making a considerable profit as  
... a result of high interest rates? In particular, I refer to the  
... Midland bank which foreclosed on Stone-Platt Industries  
... in the North-West and elsewhere in Britain. It employs  
... more than 7,000 people whose jobs are now in jeopardy.  
... That includes more than 400 at Ernest Scragg and Sons  
... Ltd. in my constituency. The receiver decided to make  
... more than half the work force at Ernest Scragg redundant  
... while meaningful discussions are taking place with a  
... potential purchaser. Is that not a subject which the House  
... should debate?

... Mr. Pym: I regret to say that I cannot provide a  
... separate day to debate that subject. My hon. Friend may  
... find an opportunity to raise it. There are other  
... opportunities, such as during the debate on certain parts  
... of the Finance Bill, when speeches on that general subject  
... would be in order. I am sorry that I cannot go further than  
... that.

... all over the world? They have promoted British industry  
... abroad and their films have received praise from small,  
... medium-sized and large firms. Will he also arrange for a  
... statement to be made explaining why the Minister for the  
... Civil Service failed to allow Members of Parliament to  
... visit the unit or to provide the film-makers with the  
... requisite information or the reasons for their dismissal.  
... That is scant thanks for loyal years of service for the  
... Government to put them on the dole on 31 March. The  
... Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians  
... is now blacking all Government work and will continue to  
... do so until something is done.

... Mr. Pym: I note the hon. Gentleman's request, but that  
... would not be a suitable subject for a statement next week.

... Mr. Patrick Cormack (Staffordshire, South-West): Is  
... my right hon. Friend aware that of the 52 questions on the  
... Order Paper today addressed to the Prime Minister, 49  
... have been couched in identical terms? Will my right hon.  
... Friend take steps to refer the whole issue of Prime  
... Minister's questions to the Procedure Committee?

... Mr. Pym: There is some demand in the House for that,  
... but at present it is by no means widespread. The Procedure  
... Committee, or a Select Committee on Procedure, has  
... considered the subject several times and will no doubt do  
... so again. It has been found that it is difficult to establish  
... a method that is not open to various abuses or misuses.  
... Therefore, it is not an easy problem to resolve. I accept  
... that it is curious to see so many similar questions on the  
... Order Paper. In recent years, the House has found that that  
... is one way in which hon. Members can raise almost any  
... question with the Prime Minister. However, it is a matter  
... of opinion whether that is the best or most appropriate use  
... of Prime Minister's Question Time. I shall listen to any  
... views put to me on that subject.

... Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is the right hon.  
... Gentleman aware that we, at least, are pleased that the  
... Government have climbed down about the use of  
... Westminster Hall for President Reagan's address? In  
... future, will the Government not take the consent of the  
... House for granted?

... Mr. Pym: The hon. Gentleman has misrepresented the  
... position. I am glad that it has been arranged for the  
... President to make a speech in the Royal Gallery. That  
... arrangement suits both Houses of Parliament and is wholly  
... appropriate. There was an informal suggestion at one stage  
... that other possibilities could be considered, but the matter  
... is now settled.

... Mr. Keith Speed (Ashford): My right hon. Friend will  
... be aware of the unsatisfactory buck-passing between the  
... Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office about the  
... Falkland Islands, the Antarctic and HMS "Endurance".  
... May we have a debate on that subject before HMS  
... "Endurance" is finally paid off and we relinquish control  
... over that most important part of the South Atlantic?

... Mr. Pym: There will be the usual debates on defence,  
... the White Paper and the Services a considerable time  
... before there is any question of a different future for HMS  
... "Endurance". I can give that assurance.