

P. R.
PRIME MINISTER:

Procedure Committee

The Lord Privy Seal and the Chief Whip are coming to see you at 10 o'clock on Monday morning to talk about the study which the Procedure Committee is making of Prime Minister's Questions. The Lord Privy Seal has been asked to give evidence to the Committee on Tuesday 24 June and Sir Peter Emery the Chairman of the Committee came to see ~~you~~ ^{him} yesterday. ?

Essentially the Committee's earliest thoughts are that Prime Minister's Questions should be reduced to 30 minutes once a week, probably on Wednesday. There would be a ballot for Questions, as now, but those near the top would be required to give notice of their Questions 24 hours before. Open Questions would be permitted but only one supplementary would be allowed.

I cannot imagine that the Opposition would agree to any such arrangement which would mean that the Leader of the Opposition had only one opportunity a week to question you instead of 2 as at present. Moreover, he would lose the ability to raise issues the day of Question Time and would instead have to follow the issues raised by Members whose names were on the Order Paper. The reaction of the Opposition is, of course, a matter for them: what is more important is what such a proposal would mean for you.

The obvious advantage is that you would need to spend only one day preparing for Prime Minister's Questions instead of 2 as at present. Michael Alison takes the view that this, together with the fact that we would have notice of the Questions, is sufficient to outweigh the disadvantages. My feeling is, however, that there are more disadvantages

than advantages in a once a week, prior notice, system. I see the disadvantages as the following:-

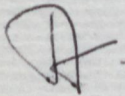
- i) The fact is that you "win" most of your encounters in the House. A reduction in the opportunities for you to put over Government policies from twice a week to once a week would be a loss not a gain.
- ii) The argument set out above is strengthened by the advent of television in the House of Commons. Television will want more of you not less, and you will want to be seen defending your policies on television twice a week not once.
- iii) A system of prior notice Questions would certainly reduce your workload. It would, however, mean that you were not kept in touch with the broad range of Government policy in the way in which the existing system requires. That in turn would require far more extensive briefing for press interviews, etc, for which the Questions briefing process now serves.
- iv) A system of prior notice Questions together with 30 minutes for Question Time would lead to ^{mini-}~~many~~ debates on specific subjects on which you would require detailed knowledge which would thereafter become much less valuable.

The fact is that the present arrangements, illogical as they are, suit you quite well because:-

- i) ^{they}~~it~~ keeps you closely in touch with the whole range of major Government policies and means that you are always better informed than interviewers, political opponents, ministerial colleagues, etc; and

ii) you use Question Time to put over and defend Government policy in a way for which there is no substitute.

I suspect that it is unlikely that the Procedure Committee initiative will really get off the ground, if only because there is no real sign of great discontent with Prime Minister's Questions in the House. It is after all up to Members themselves to put down Substantive Questions and very few of them do. The Lord Privy Seal, in giving evidence to this Procedure Committee, will obviously have to be fairly circumspect. We cannot afford to give the impression that you are somehow dissatisfied with the present form: otherwise we shall have headlines about the Prime Minister wanting to duck scrutiny by the House of Commons. You will no doubt wish to discuss tactics with him and the Chief Whip.



TIM FLESHER

14 June 1985

cc Mr Butler
Mr Powell
Mr Turnbull
Mr Addison
Mr Sherbourne
Mr Alison
Mr Ingham