

Subject
cc master.



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

17 June 1985

The Prime Minister met the Lord Privy Seal and the Chief Whip today to discuss the proposals of the Procedure Committee for the conduct of Prime Minister's Questions and, in particular, the evidence the Lord Privy Seal was proposing to give to the Committee.

The Prime Minister noted that the Procedure Committee had proposed a 30 minute session of Questions once a week with notice to be given of the Question to be asked on the day before. She stressed that the form for Prime Minister's Questions was a matter for the House of Commons, not for the Government: she would remain ready to answer Questions in whatever form the House of Commons decided. Nevertheless, the meeting noted that there were clear advantages and disadvantages in the proposals of the Procedure Committee. The obvious advantage was that a session once a week with prior notice of Questions would make fewer demands on the Prime Minister's time than the present arrangements. Moreover, substantive Questions might help to reduce the tendency to disorder during Prime Minister's Questions which appeared to be increasing. It was, however, unlikely that the Opposition would see advantage in switching to an arrangement under which the Prime Minister was questioned only once a week. Moreover, there were a number of disadvantages from the Government's point of view. For example, the present arrangements enabled the Prime Minister to defend Government policy in the most public way possible twice a week. To reduce her opportunities to do so to once a week would be a loss to the Government as well as to the Opposition. A system of advance notice for Questions would rob Prime Minister's Questions of much of its spontaneity and hence of its topical interest. In addition, the Prime Minister herself would no longer be required to keep herself briefed on the broad range of Government policy for Prime Minister's Questions and would, therefore, have to find some other way of meeting that need. Moreover, the substantive Questions envisaged by the Procedure Committee may well become excessively detailed, in which case the Prime Minister would see no alternative but to transfer them.

Given these disadvantages and the likely resistance of the Opposition to the proposals made by the Procedure Committee, they were unlikely to make a great deal of progress. Whatever the defects of the present arrangements for Prime Minister's Questions it was clear that they met the wishes of the House. The opportunity to put down substantive Questions was already there but very few Members took advantage of it. Any attempt to impose a different regime upon Members of Parliament would be likely to be met by increased ingenuity in getting round its provisions. The Engagements Question had been invented to put open Questions to the Prime Minister, and other devices would be found in future if that was what the House wanted. Moreover, it was unlikely that a change in procedure alone would bring about an improvement in parliamentary behaviour. A much more significant influence would be the advent of television, if that came about. A much more sustainable position for the Procedure Committee might be to promise a review of the conduct of Prime Minister's Questions if, and when, television was finally installed.

Summing up the discussion the Prime Minister said that in his evidence to the Procedure Committee the Lord Privy Seal should stress that the conduct of Prime Minister's Questions was a matter for the House and that the Prime Minister remained ready to meet the wishes of the House. He might however point out in addition, that the present system had evolved largely because Members wanted it and that the opportunity to ask substantive Questions already existed. Moreover, the Prime Minister could not be expected to answer extremely detailed substantive Questions and such Questions would, as in the past, be likely to be transferred. Any new arrangements likely to command the support of the House as a whole could not prevent Members from raising with the Prime Minister the issues of the day. There would for example, be discontent if the Prime Minister were not to answer Questions on a Thursday after Cabinet meetings.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Murdo Maclean.

TIM FLESHER

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Lord Privy Seal's Office

bcc Mr Butler
Mr Alison
Mr Sherbourne