



10 SLBARK

## 10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

**MR. MICHAEL TOWNLEY**

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Thank you for your letter of 2 July about the evidence due to be given by the Lord Privy Seal to the Procedure Committee about Prime Minister's Question Time. We discussed this matter today but this letter sets out formally our response to the suggestions made by the Procedure Committee, in addition to the conclusions of the Prime Minister's meeting with the Lord Privy Seal and Chief Whip summarised in my letter to Alison Smith of 17 June.

- (i) As you say the Committee's proposals depend upon the Prime Minister willingness to transfer detailed substantive Questions. The Prime Minister is firmly of the view that she cannot be expected to answer detailed Questions which are wholly within the domain of a departmental minister. At present she is prepared to answer Questions across a broad range of Government policy and often on detailed points of application. If, however, Members were to put down detailed Questions on which there were to be up to 5 minutes of supplementaries, the Prime Minister would feel justified in transferring such Questions. More generally a prohibition against the transfer of Questions would withdraw uniquely from the Prime Minister a degree of protection which has hitherto always been available to the Government.
- (ii) The Committee argue that Members would be encouraged to table specific Questions rather than open Questions because they would then receive two replies rather than one. In practice I rather doubt this. Of necessity Members have to frame their supplementary before they receive the substantive answer. Moreover the same applies to substantive Questions in the present system and very few Members take advantage of it.
- (iii) Similar arguments apply against the Committee's suggestion that Members would be deterred from putting down Open Questions by the fact that only one supplementary Question was allowed. That is,

CST



of course, all that Members are allowed at present.

- (iv) The arrangements proposed by the Committee offer at least the potential of coordination. For example, if there were a number of Government backbenchers at the top of the Order Paper they could effectively freeze out the Leader of the Opposition by so choosing the subject of their Questions. Similarly, an Opposition backbencher near the top of the Order Paper might well feel obliged to consult the Leader of the Opposition about the subjects he wished raised. Far from increasing the backbench content of Prime Minister's Questions it might well reduce it.
- (v) The ingenuity of Members is such that even if some method were found of effectively discouraging the present Open Question a way would be found around it. For example, a Question along the lines of "is the Prime Minister satisfied with the present level of public expenditure" would enable practically any supplementary to be raised.
- (vi) From the point of view of the Prime Minister and her office the new arrangements proposed would create considerably more work. It would require only one Open Question on the Order Paper for the Prime Minister to require briefing on the whole range of policy and events as at present. Moreover, the suggestion that notice would be given of up to 20 substantive Questions at 2.30 p.m. on the day before Questions would be more difficult indeed to manage. This may indeed be more notice than is currently given for Private Notice Questions, but such Questions are answered one at a time. The Prime Minister's office would be asked to prepare the answers to up to 20, including the supplementaries, in the space of two or three hours so that the Prime Minister could study them overnight.

TIM FLESHER

5 July 1985





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2 July 1985

*Dear Tim,*

EVIDENCE TO THE PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

The Lord Privy Seal is due to give oral evidence to the Procedure Committee on Tuesday 9 July about (i) Prime Minister's Question Time and (ii) the Operation of Standing Order No 10 (emergency debates).

You will recall that the Prime Minister discussed the Lord Privy Seal's proposed evidence on the subject of Prime Minister's Question Time with the Lord Privy Seal and the Chief Whip on 17 June (your letter of that date to Alison Smith refers).

Since then we have received, in confidence, from the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, Sir Peter Emery, the attached draft paper which gives some further information about the lines on which the Committee's consideration of this issue is developing. As you will see, the Lord Privy Seal has made some marginal comments.

I should be grateful if you would kindly let me know, in the light of this draft paper, if there is any further information you can let me have about the Prime Minister's views on these proposals, beyond those indicated in your letter of 17 June, which we can then cover in the Lord Privy Seal's briefing. It seems clear, for example, that assurances will be sought as to how far the Prime Minister might be prepared to undertake not to transfer substantive Questions under the new arrangements the Committee are considering.

*Yours sincerely,  
Michael.*

M W TOWNLEY



Select Committee on Procedure

Questions to the Prime Minister

Notes on the proposals discussed at the meeting on 11th June

1. The Committee recognises that many Members value the opportunity to ask topical questions of the Prime Minister. There is, however, considerable unease about several aspects of arrangements for questions to the Prime Minister. Disquiet is expressed not only by Members themselves, but by the public who hear extracts on news broadcasts.
  - Among questions to the Prime Minister, the open "engagements" question has almost completely taken over the Order Paper.
  - The open question has the effect that it deprives the Prime Minister of notice of the "real" question. The practice of the House with regard to Ministers generally is to give notice of questions.
  - Because no notice is given of the "real" question, the Prime Minister may not be put under sustained detailed questioning.



- Supplementaries to the open question may cover any subject inconsequentially.
  - The response of Members saying when called by Mr. Speaker "No. 3, Sir", and being given the reply "I refer the hon. Gentlemen to the reply I gave some moments ago" sounds otiose and is a slight waste of time.
2. A previous Committee, in 1976-77, was anxious that a greater number of specific questions should be asked. Both the then Prime Minister and the present Prime Minister have shown their readiness to accept direct questions and not to transfer them. This is much to be welcomed. In practice, however, Members as a whole have preferred to use the open question. It would in any case be impossible to outlaw questions of that form: the engagement question is merely the currently fashionable variety.
  3. It seems to the present Committee that for the generality of Members the wish to be topical is pre-eminent, and wholly understandable. The present notice period of ten sitting days militates against topicality; but Members value the present arrangements because they know almost a fortnight in advance whether their questions are likely to be called. They can then adjust their diaries accordingly.
  4. Question time would be more effective if notice were, in most cases, given of the "real" questions which Members intend to ask. Time would not be wasted on preliminaries. Other Members could ask detailed supplementaries. If notice were much shorter, questions could be topical.
  5. The Committee is therefore considering whether present rules for questions to the Prime Minister should be changed in the following ways:



- (a) Members would give notice ten sitting days in advance of their intention to table a question.
- (b) At that time names would be listed on the Order Paper as at present, but without any reference to a specific question, unless a Member tabled it then.
- (c) Members so listed would then be required to give notice in the Table Office of the specific terms of their questions by no later than 2.30 pm. on the day before the Prime Minister was due to answer. Such notices would then appear on the Order Paper on the next day. If Members failed to give notice they would lose their questions.
- (d) As the subject of questions would then be known the Speaker would be able to ensure that supplementaries related to the Questions tabled, as is normal practice.
- (e) The Prime Minister would then be held to the subject of the original question, and would be able to be questioned in some depth without facing supplementaries on wholly unrelated matters.
- (f) Unlike the Member who tables an open question the Member who tables a specific question would, in effect, receive two answers - one to the question of which he had given notice and the second to his supplementary.
- (g) The Speaker should discourage more than one supplementary on any open questions, which might still be tabled under this new procedure.

YES



6. As a separate proposal for improving the working of the question period with the Prime Minister, the Committee is considering whether it should be held only once a week, but for half an hour. As against any slight loss in opportunities to ask topical questions, that would have the probable advantage, from the point of view of backbench Members, of increasing their share of time because the proportion of total time taken by the Leaders of opposition parties would be less than at present.
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Problems with such proposals:

- i. Is the proposed period of notice practicable, viz. 2.30 pm. Monday for Tuesday, or 2.30 pm. Wednesday for Thursday, from the point of view of Members tabling questions? It would presumably be more likely to achieve the Committee's aim of achieving topicality than notice given on Thursday or Friday for the following Tuesday. For the Prime Minister, these proposals would of course give notice which, in 95 cases out of 100, she doesn't have at present. There would be much more time for preparation of answers than for a PNQ.
- ii. Although the Prime Minister has not transferred questions under present conditions when few questions are specific, might she be tempted to do so under this new system? If Questions were transferred freely, the scheme would fail. Should transfers of questions be specifically excluded?



iii. Would PM's questions lose their interest if, as seems bound to happen sometimes, the first two or three questions were narrow, friendly, specific questions which could give rise to only a narrow range of supplementaries?

iv. Would Members still wish to table engagements questions or other varieties of open questions 24 hours in advance? If so, should there be any restraint in addition to that proposed above (Para. 5(e)) that Mr. Speaker should be restrictive on supplementaries? The Committee might wish to consider Mr. Cormack's suggestion (PMQ2) that Mr. Speaker should be authorised to move on to the "next different question on the Order Paper"?

YES

v. Instead of tabling a "notice of intention to table a question" (as in para. 5(a)), should there be a straightforward ballot, as for Private Members' motions, a fortnight ahead for the right to ask an oral question, with only 10 or 20 names being drawn?

YES

G.C.

26th June 1985