



SRWAG2

cc: LPSO
CWO

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

5 August 1985

Dear Peter,

Thank you for your letter of 18 July about the Select Committee on Procedure's consideration of the format of Prime Minister's Questions. I appreciate the Committee's invitation to me to let them have my views directly but, as you will know, it has been the practice of successive Prime Ministers not to give evidence to Select Committees of the House and I would prefer not to depart from that practice. It was with that in mind that I had a full discussion with the Leader of the House before he met the Committee and his evidence reflected my views. I hope therefore that the Committee will be content with this written account of my views.

As John Biffen will have told you, my starting-point is that the future format of Prime Minister's Questions is a matter for the House of Commons and I should, of course, be willing to fall in with the decisions of the House in this respect. For my part, I have no complaint to make about the existing arrangements. Indeed, I assume that, since the opportunity to table substantive rather than open questions already exists but is taken up by only a few Members, the present system has evolved because it meets the wishes of most Members of the House.

With regard to your objective of encouraging more substantive questions, I have, as you know, normally been willing to answer these questions myself rather than

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transferring them. It is my intention to continue that practice, provided that questions do not become focussed on details which are wholly within the domain of a Departmental Minister. If any new system produced such questions, there could come a point at which I should feel bound to transfer them.

It has been suggested that various "incentives" should be provided to encourage Members to place substantive questions - for example, a limit of one Supplementary on open questions and a right to define such questions twenty-four hours before the time of answer in order to give them greater immediacy. I am sceptical whether such changes will discourage the open question. What, after all, is an open question? I think it is likely that the ingenuity of Members would be capable of drafting questions with a sufficiently wide ambit to allow the Leader of the Opposition and others to press the Prime Minister on the issues of the day so that the open question would return in another form.

If, however, the aim of the Committee were achieved and there were a greater number of substantive questions, I am bound to say that notice of only twenty-four hours would cause some problems for me. Since the objective is to allow questioning in depth on specific subjects, the other side of the coin is that I would have to prepare answers in similar depth on a series of matters which may be unfamiliar. Although the notice may be longer than for a PNQ, other Ministers do not have to answer several PNQs in one day. The problem of preparation within the time available would be more acute if Question Time were doubled to thirty minutes once a week since the number of questions, and correspondingly the range of substantive issues, would be doubled.

I return to the point that I will comply with any arrangements which the House decides upon. But you will detect that, since I suspect that the present arrangements have developed because they give the House what it currently

wants, and since I believe that the House would adapt any new procedures so that it continues to get what it wants, I am not seeking changes in the present arrangements.

Y
Lomax

Rayner

Sir Peter Emery, M.P.



Government Chief Whip
12 Downing Street, London SW1

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31/7

30th July, 1985

Dear Peter,

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE

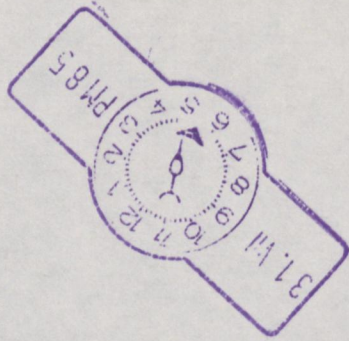
The Prime Minister has asked me to have an informal word with you concerning your letter to her of 18th July, however with the excitement of the last few days no suitable opportunity arose.

She is not sure that it would be helpful to have a personal discussion because, of course, John Biffen fully reflected her view, and that of the Government, when he came to give evidence to your Committee. She is, however, proposing to send a reply to your letter of 18th July rather than have a meeting, but I wanted to let you know in advance how the Prime Minister intends to handle this matter.

Yours
John

Sir Peter Emery M.P.

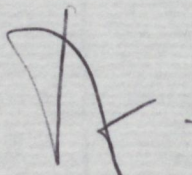
Rashamant : PM's Questions
7/79



PRIME MINISTER

cc CW +
LPS

You discussed with the Chief Whip amongst others the letter from Sir Peter Emery inviting you to give evidence to the Select Committee on Procedure on Prime Minister's Questions. The Chief Whip has written to Sir Peter giving an advance indication that you would not wish to give evidence: both the Chief Whip and the Lord Privy Seal have cleared the terms of the attached written response.



TIM FLESHER

30 July 1985

PM's Questions?



Government Chief Whip
12 Downing Street, London SW1

26th July, 1985

Dear Mr Butler

Unfortunately the Chief Whip did not have an opportunity to talk to Peter Emery about his letter of 18th July and he is proposing to send the attached letter early next week unless he hears from you or the Lord Privy Seal and I have copied this letter to David Morris.

Yours sincerely
Robina

ROBINA Z FINLAY

Robin Butler Esq.,
10 Downing Street.



Government Chief Whip
12 Downing Street, London SW1

26th July, 1985

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE

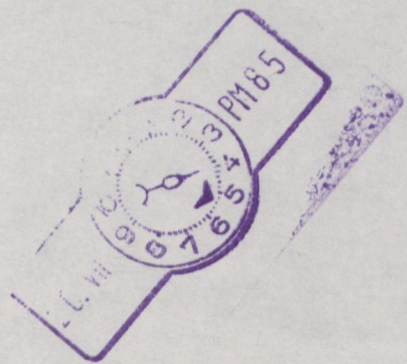
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She is, however, proposing to send a reply to your letter of 18th July rather than have a meeting, but I wanted to sound you out as to whether you think this would be an acceptable arrangement for you and your colleagues.

Sir Peter Emery M.P.

Parliament : PM's Questions July 79.





// CF
pse Bf m
Tuesday
1 Aug.
PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

26 July 1985

Dear Tim

Thank you for your letter of 24 July enclosing the draft answer which the Prime Minister is considering sending to Sir Peter Emery about the format for Prime Minister's Questions.

The Lord Privy Seal has seen the draft and has commented: "I think the Prime Minister's draft letter is admirable".

Yours ever,
Alison

ALISON SMITH
Private Secretary

Tim Flesher Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister

file



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

24 July 1985

Dear Anne,

You will recall that the Lord Privy Seal discussed with the Prime Minister the evidence that he was to give to the Select Committee on Procedure about the format for Prime Minister's Questions. Following his evidence the Chairman of the Select Committee, Sir Peter Emery, has now written to the Prime Minister seeking her views and, if possible, an appearance by the Prime Minister before the Committee. On the latter point the Prime Minister is unlikely to depart from the normal practice of successive Prime Ministers not to give evidence to Select Committees, but is considering sending a reasonably full written reply to the Committee. I attach a draft on which I should be grateful for the Lord Privy Seal's views. I should be grateful if Murdo Maclean, to whom I am also copying this, could seek the Chief Whip's views.

Yours ever

Tm.

TIM FLESHER

Miss A Smith
Private Secretary
Lord Privy Seal's Office

cc. Michael Alison Esq MP

DRAFT

DRAFT



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

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/With regard

DRAFT

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/I return

RAFT

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Sir Peter Emery, M.P.

from: Sir Peter Emery MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

for

18th July 1985

Dear Margaret,

Select Committee on Procedure

There continues to be a good deal of comment both in the House and outside about the arrangements for the twice-weekly period when you answer questions in the House. Criticisms from outside the House may have more to do with noise than with the minutiae of parliamentary procedure, but the Select Committee on Procedure feels under an obligation to consider various procedural options for making the most effective use of the time available.

As you will know the Committee has already heard evidence in private from John Biffen and has been considering proposals aimed at retaining the topicality of questions, but also encouraging the tabling of a greater number of specific questions (of which notice might be given as little as 24 hours in advance). The Committee has now reached the point at which it would like to reach conclusions, but before doing so would greatly value an opportunity to discuss with you present procedures and some of the possible alternatives. I should be delighted to talk to you (or to Michael Alison) about this suggestion, if you think that would be helpful, and particularly to discuss the form such a meeting (which obviously would not be possible until the autumn) might take.

Always
A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Peter Emery', written in a cursive style.
Chairman

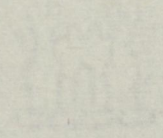
The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher MP
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Parliament; PM's Quests July 1979



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

CONGRESSIONAL



LONDON