



PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

18 December 1985

Dear Terence,

I am writing further to the First Report from the Liaison Committee (Session 1984-85) on the Select Committee system.

Although, as it acknowledges, this report is essentially a factual summary of the work done by select committees since 1982, it contains several recommendations on which, although ultimately matters for the House to decide, it may be helpful to the Committee to be aware of the Government's view.

Firstly, I am sure that there is widespread support for the view expressed in the report that the new Departmentally-related select committees set up in 1979 have now established themselves as a major, successful Parliamentary reform. The statistic of 275 reports made by these committees since 1979 is in itself an indication of the remarkable development in the range of parliamentary scrutiny exercised by them over almost all aspects of Government activity. I note too the view expressed by the Committee (paragraph 2) that the new opportunities for debating the Estimates introduced since 1982 constitute a further important procedural reform; and that this combined with the establishment of the new committee system, represents a significant shift in the balance between Parliament and the Executive. I assure you that Ministers will continue to co-operate fully in these developments.

The Rt Hon Terence Higgins MP
House of Commons

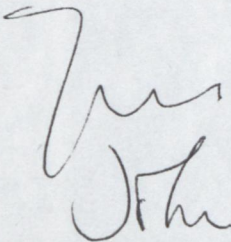
As to the continued exclusion of the Law Officers' Departments from the scope of the Departmental select committee system, the Government's view remains in accordance with the decision taken by the House when the committees were initially established.

I have noted also the comments made in the report on the extent to which select committee reports have been debated (paragraphs 17 to 22). As the report acknowledges, the new Estimates procedure has provided further opportunities to debate the reports produced about the expenditure of the Departments which committees oversee. And, as the report further points out, there have been a growing number of debates on the Floor, other than those specifically on a report, itself, where the relevance of a particular report has been formally referred to on the Order Paper. Nevertheless I acknowledge that there is still further scope for improvement in this respect: I shall continue to pay close attention to the wish of the House to debate any reports from select committees that are considered to be of special importance. More generally, and whilst, as you know, the planning of the programme of business on the Floor necessarily has to take account of many factors, we will seek to ensure that careful account will be taken, wherever possible, of any relevant select committee report that is known to be close to publication.

With regard to the nomination of committees (paragraphs 25 to 27), I very much regret the delays that have taken place. I doubt, however, whether specific time limits on appointments to select committees are practicable. As you are aware, these matters are far from being exclusively in the Government's hands; and, especially after a General Election, a considerable time may have to elapse before it is known, for example, whether particular Opposition Members will be available to serve. I hope, however, that in the general interests of the

House, a way can soon be found to avoid a recurrence of the recent difficulties over the automatic 'blocking' of appointments to select committees.

Finally, I am glad to say, in relation to the question of staffing (paragraphs 29 to 32), that considerable progress has recently been made towards a new grading structure, on which agreement is being sought by the end of the year. I hope the results of this will be of value to select committees.



JOHN BIFFEN

On certain aspects of the present select committee structure - the limitations on the scope for sub-committees (paragraph 28); and the extent to which committees are able to hold joint meetings (paragraphs 23 and 24) - the Committee refer to recommendations already made by their predecessors. On these I have to say that the Government's view remains unchanged.

As regards sub-committees, the number and extent of enquiries now made by the existing Departmental select committees, to which reference has been made, would make it much more difficult for Government Departments to accommodate the potential expansion that more sub-committees might entail given the need for strict control over the costs of public administration. I fully recognise, however, that this is, in the final analysis, a matter for the House, and not for Ministers, to decide.

Secondly, in respect of the question of the scope for select committees to hold joint meetings and to take evidence together, the confinement of this provision to departmental committees appropriately reflects, in the Government's view, the distinction between the functions of these committees and those of other select committees, in particular the Public Accounts Committee, which conduct their enquiries in accordance with separate conventions and procedures.

As regards the committee's comments (paragraphs 3 to 13) on the working of the new procedures for the considerations of Estimates, I fully recognise the problems that have arisen when limited time has been available for the preliminary appraisal of Supplementary Estimates by select committees; and I appreciate the efforts that have been made to overcome them. Supplementary Estimates, by their nature, normally reflect expenditure requirements that have arisen unexpectedly. Ministers will, however, continue, to provide as much time for this purpose as possible, within the inevitable constraints including those referred to in the report.

Bearing in mind other demands on the Parliamentary programme, the Government proposes, in respect of the recommendation in paragraph 9, to table an amendment to Standing Order 19 which would provide that one day of the three 'Estimates Days' might be taken as two half-days. But regards the other amendment to that Standing Order proposed in paragraph 10, it would appear to me, prima facie, that, insofar as the arrangements for the timing of these debates are made in accordance with the normal practice of the House, no further clarification seems necessary.

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With the Compliments
of the
Private Secretary
to the
Lord Privy Seal



PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

4 December 1985

Dear Nigel,

LIAISON COMMITTEE REPORT ON SELECT COMMITTEES

The Liaison Committee of Select Committee Chairmen published before the Summer Recess, a further report on 'the Select Committee system' - First Report, Session 1984-5 HCC ~~366~~ 363

The report is primarily a factual up-dating, summarising the work done by Select Committees since 1982. Its main proposals are:

- (i) provision for Estimates Days to be divided into half-days (paragraph 9);
- (ii) specification of who allocates the Estimates Days (paragraph 10);
- (iii) provision for Law Officers' Departments to be included in Select Committee coverage (paragraph 11);
- (iv) no change on funds allocated to overseas travel (paragraph 16);
- (v) more time for debate on Select Committee Reports (paragraph 21);
- (vi) powers of Select Committees to exchange and deliberate together should be extended to 'non-Departmental' Committees eg PAC (paragraph 24);
- (vii) Committee of Selection to be given the power to replace non-attending committee members (paragraph 25);
- (viii) All Departmental Select Committees to have the power to appoint sub-committees (paragraph 26);
- (ix) need for grading review of support staff (paragraph 32).

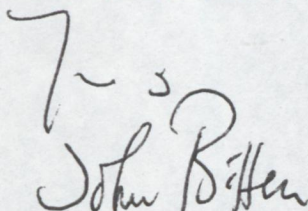
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The Report is uncontroversial in tone and does not touch on the general question of Select Committee powers or on the disclosure of official information to Select Committees.

I attach a draft letter to the Chairman of the Liaison Committee which has been prepared in consultation with Treasury Officials and those of other Departments. I should be grateful for any further comments you and colleagues might have by Friday 13 December.

It will be noted that the line taken with regard to the continued exclusion of the Law Officers' Departments from the scope of the Departmental Select Committee system, and the rejection of the proposal for powers to create more sub-committees, is in accordance with that previously taken on similar proposals.

I am copying this to other members of the Cabinet, the Chief Whip and Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Biffen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a flourish at the end.

JOHN BIFFEN

Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

DRAFT LETTER FROM THE LORD PRIVY SEAL TO THE RT HON TERENCE HIGGINS MP

I am writing further to the First Report from the Liaison Committee (Session 1984-85) on the Select Committee system.

Although, as it acknowledges, this report is essentially a factual summary of the work done by select committees since 1982, it contains several recommendations on which, although ultimately matters for the House to decide, it may be helpful to the Committee to be aware of the Government's view.

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Treasury Chambers, Parliament Street, SW1P 3AG
01-233 3000

Miss Alison Smith
PS/Lord Privy Seal
Privy Council Office
Whitehall
LONDON SW1A 2AT

16 December 1985

Dear Alison

LIAISON COMMITTEE REPORT ON THE SELECT COMMITTEE SYSTEM

The Chancellor has seen the Lord Privy Seal's letter of 4 December.

He agrees, generally, with the line the Lord Privy Seal is taking in his draft reply to the Liaison Committee. He has just one drafting amendment to suggest. In line 4 of page 3 of your draft, he would like to see the words "including those" inserted after "constraints". The significance of this is simply that the Government consider there are constraints (in particular, making it unwise to take Winter Supplementaries after Christmas) that are in addition to those referred to in the report.

I am copying this letter to private secretaries to all members of the Cabinet and the Chief Whip; and also to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever,

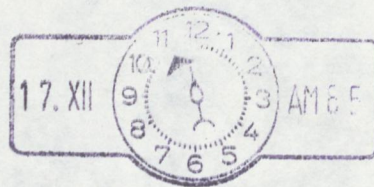
Tony

A W KUCZYS

Parliament,

HOC procedures

17 7



cc/BG



SCOTTISH OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AU

Rt Hon John Biffen MP
Lord Privy Seal
Privy Council Office
Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2AT

Handwritten initials

12 December 1985

Dear John,

LIAISON COMMITTEE REPORT ON SELECT COMMITTEE

Thank you for copying to me your letter of 4 December to Nigel Lawson concerning the Government's reponse to the Report of the Liaison Committee of Select Committee Chairmen on "The Select Committee System".

I fully support the line you propose to take, particularly on the setting up of sub-committees and exchanges between Select Committees and 'non-Departmental' Committees and I am therefore content with your draft reply.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

*Yours wes,
George.*

PARLIAMENT PT7
HIC PROCEDURE



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13.M85

LETTER COMMITTEE REPORT ON SELECT COMMITTEE

I am writing this letter to inform you of the progress of the Select Committee's work. The Committee has held several meetings and has received many suggestions from members of the public. We are currently reviewing these suggestions and will be reporting back to you in due course. I am sure that you will be pleased to hear that the Committee is working hard to improve the HIC procedure.