

Prime Minister

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It seems that Mr Biffen and the Chief Whip have managed to get the opposition to agree with the proposals you agreed with Francis Pym last November (page 2).

PRIME MINISTER

Yes no

You will wish to see the line Mr Biffen proposes to take on points A and B on page 3. Content for him to proceed as he suggests?

FIRST REPORT FROM THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE (SUPPLY)

The Chief Sec is firmly in favour

In his letter to you of 25 November Francis Pym outlined his initial proposals for the handling of this report, which is mainly concerned with ways of providing the House of Commons with better opportunities to debate Departmental Estimates and with getting rid of the present misleading concept of Supply Days. The schedule attached to that letter summarised the report's recommendations and the suggested Government line.

21/6

A debate on the report subsequently took place on an Adjournment Motion on 15 February. Francis Pym then indicated the Government's broad support for the Committee's recommendations, but made clear some provisional reservations - in particular that there should initially be perhaps only 3 new 'Estimates Days' (rather than the proposed 8), and that it might be more appropriate if the Liaison Committee of Select Committee Chairmen, rather than a special Business Committee, were to advise the House on how these 'Estimates Days' should be structured.

The Chief Whip and I have recently concluded our discussions with the Opposition about the further steps to be taken on this report in the light of the debate, with a view to the tabling, as promised, of substantive Government Motions. I have also spoken to Edward du Cann, as Chairman of the Liaison Committee, and to the Chairman of the Committee, Terence Higgins. As a result, and despite the criticisms raised in the debate that the number of 'Estimates Days' proposed by the Government was too small, the Chief Whip and I have reached agreement with the Opposition that the Government Motions

.../tabled

tabled for debate should generally follow the proposals set out in Francis Pym's letter to you of 25 November and proposed by him when opening the debate on 15 February. This would mean that the Motions would provide that:

- a. there should only be three 'Estimates Days' - at least as a start;
- b. the Liaison Committee of Select Committee Chairmen, and not a special Business Committee, should have the function of advising the House on how these 'Estimates Days' might be structured (eg which Estimates should be debated and for how long); and that any divisions arising on such debates should be grouped together at 10 pm;
- c. the present 29 Supply Days should be replaced by 19 "Opposition Days", with those House matters (annual debates on the Armed Services, EC matters, select committees and Scottish affairs) at present traditionally taken in Supply time taken in future Government time;
- d. the proposed 19 'Opposition Days' should be granted entirely to the Opposition without any allocation to the minor parties;
- e. Consolidated Fund Bills would in future be taken formally;
- f. to compensate for the loss of Private Members' time arising from the ending of debates on the Second Readings of Consolidated Fund Bills, the time remaining on each of the three days after the remaining stages of the Consolidated Fund Bills had been taken formally would be allocated to Private Members' time. Provision would be made for automatic closure at 9 am on such days. An additional Friday would also be allocated to Private Members' time;

.../g.

- g. Motions providing for the dates of recesses would in future be debatable for 1½ hours only.

A | The most controversial of these proposals seems likely to be that providing that any allocation of the 19 'Opposition Days' to minor parties should be at the discretion of the Opposition. This is in accordance with the recommendation made by the Procedure (Supply) Committee. The Motion will be amendable, and the SDP, or the Liberals, will no doubt table an amendment. If necessary, we should seek to ensure its rejection. The Opposition have agreed that they will undertake to continue existing practice.

B | The Opposition have also expressed concern that if the various items of annual House business referred to at c. above were transferred from Supply time to Government time, they would lose all control over the timing of such debates. It seems desirable to retain the status quo in this respect. I would accordingly propose to offer during the debate an assurance, which the Opposition have indicated would be acceptable, that as far as possible the Opposition's "say" in the timing of business traditionally taken on "ex-Supply" Days should remain as at present. Thus the Opposition would have a veto on any Government proposal to use a particular day for such business. The Opposition could propose that such a day should be an Opposition Day, but the Government would, for their part, also have the right to deny its use either as an Opposition Day or for House business formerly taken in Supply time. Both Government and Opposition would thus retain their present power of veto over the use of particular days for all the former purposes of Supply Days. I would also propose to give an assurance, as necessary, that practice with regard to the use of Government and Opposition time for Opposed Private Business should effectively remain as at present.

.../I would

I would now propose to arrange for the preparation of the necessary Motions, and for these to be tabled for debate at some appropriate opportunity, probably after 10 pm, before the Summer Recess.

I am copying this to Cabinet colleagues and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

WJB

J B

18 June 1982

21 JUN 1982



COLLECTION



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

28 June, 1982

Dear David

First Report from the Select Committee on
Procedure (Supply)

The Prime Minister has seen the Lord President's minute of 18 June. She is content with the approach set out in his minute, and agrees that he should now arrange for the preparation of the necessary Motions, and for these to be tabled for debate at an appropriate opportunity before the summer recess.

I am copying this to Private Secretaries to members of the Cabinet and to David Wright.

Yours ever

Willie Richett

David Heyhoe, Esq.,
Lord President's Office

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

28 June 1982

From the Secretary of State

Dear John

First Report from the Select Committee on Procedure (Supply)

Thank you for sending me a copy of your minute of 18 June to the Prime Minister.

I note what you and the Chief Whip have agreed with the Opposition and fully agree with the way in which you now propose to proceed.

I am copying this to Cabinet colleagues and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever

John Biffen

The Rt Hon W John Biffen



PRIME MINISTER

FIRST REPORT FROM THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE (SUPPLY)

John Biffen sent me a copy of his letter to you of 18 June about the implementation of the recommendations of the first report from the Select Committee on Procedure (Supply). I am glad that the long drawn out discussions have now reached a satisfactory conclusion. Increasing the effectiveness of Parliamentary scrutiny of Estimates can only redound to our advantage in terms of efficiency and value for money. I hope it will prove possible for the necessary motions to be tabled in the fairly near future.

I am copying this to Cabinet colleagues and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

L. B.

LEON BRITTAN
24 June 1982

28 JUN 1982

