

E.P.

File

Note: Discussion with OLA  
succeeded by myrole.

AT 1/2

PRIME MINISTER

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LOCAL AUTHORITY PROPAGANDA AND ABUSES

Patrick Jenkin is probably right that immediate legislation to prevent propaganda on the rates would be regarded as a blatant attempt by the Government to muzzle its critics. The matter should therefore be referred to the Widdicombe Enquiry. But why should it take five months for a report to be produced? Surely three months would be sufficient.

The idea of amending the Abolition Bill to prevent anti-abolition propaganda is attractive. This, too, would cause a political rumpus; but abolition is a special case, and many of the Government's supporters would certainly welcome such action.

The proposed draft statement on the Widdicombe Enquiry needs amendment. It is vital that the members of the Committee should be completely clear what they are being asked to investigate, and the terms of reference do not at present make this sufficiently explicit. We suggest the following terms:

"To enquire whether there have been and are abuses or improprieties in the administration of local authorities; and in particular to determine whether sufficient distinction has been made between (1) the interests of the council and (2) the interests of party political groups, in the spending of public money, in the appointment of people to council posts, and in the conduct of council business."

We suggest that there should be no request for recommendations: the Committee will no doubt produce recommendations in any case; but they may not be sensible,

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and we will find it easier to ignore them if we have not explicitly asked for them.

It would be useful if Bernard Ingham could delicately hint to the press that Widdicombe is a former Labour candidate: the Government might as well get the credit for being impartial.

Conclusion

We recommend:

1. That general legislation on propaganda should await Widdicombe's interim report, but that he should be required to produce such a report by May rather than July.
2. That the Abolition Bill should be amended to deal with the special case of anti-abolition propaganda.
3. That the terms of reference in the draft statement on the enquiry should be amended, and that Bernard should brief the Press on Widdicombe's background.

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