

Ref. A084/2937

MR BUTLER

Attribution in Cabinet and Cabinet Committee Minutes

The Chancellor of the Exchequer queried the extent to which expressions of view had been attributed to individual Ministers in the minute of the discussion in OD on 22 October of Tornados for Turkey (OD(84) 11th Meeting, Minute 1).

2. The general rule is that the opening statement on an issue (incorporating a precis of the memorandum under consideration and any supplementary points made by the Minister presenting it) and the summing up are the only parts of the minute which are attributed to an individual Minister, and that other parts of a minute should be impersonal (ie no attribution of views to particular Ministers). The guidance given to Secretaries envisages exceptions to the non-attribution rule:

- (1) when more than one memorandum has been circulated, in which case an opening statement on each memorandum is attributed;
- (2) when a specifically departmental view has been put forward, or a suggestion has been made to safeguard a departmental interest;
- (3) where there is a conflict of interest between two Departments;
- (4) where a speaker reserves his (or his Minister's) position or formally registers dissent (this applies in Cabinet only if the dissenting Minister indicates his intention to resign).

3. In the particular minute in question there were four attributions: to the Minister for Trade, the Minister for Defence Procurement, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth

Office, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The first two attributions were covered by the general rule and the first exception: both the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Defence had sent out minutes on the subject (though neither of them was present at the meeting). It is arguable that the other two attributions fell within the second and third exceptions, and indeed the views of the Chancellor of the Exchequer were already on record in a minute, though that was not formally one of the minutes which the Committee had before them. But the minute of the discussion could clearly have been written without these two attributions.

4. In contemporary conditions, given the prevalence of leaks, it is clearly important to interpret the rules strictly. I therefore propose to issue an instruction to Secretaries of Cabinet and Cabinet Committees as in the draft attached.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

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DRAFT MINUTE FROM SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG
MEMBERS OF THE CABINET SECRETARIAT

Attribution of Views to Individuals in
Minutes of Meetings

The general rule on the attribution of views to individuals in minutes of meetings of the Cabinet and Cabinet Committees is set out in paragraphs 15-20 of the Guide to Minute Taking. It can be summed up as follows:

As a general rule the only parts of a minute which should be attributed are the opening statement or statements of the issue by those who have circulated memoranda for discussion and the summing up. The summary of important points made in discussion should be impersonal - ie should not attribute views to persons.

It may exceptionally be necessary to attribute views to persons beyond this:

- (1) when a specifically departmental view has been put forward, or a suggestion has been made to safeguard a departmental interest;

- (2) when there is a conflict of interest between two Departments;
- (3) when a speaker formally reserves his (or his Minister's or Department's) position or formally registers dissent.

2. The Guide to Minute Taking lists a number of cogent reasons for minimising the attribution of views to individual persons. In present circumstances the risk of unauthorised disclosures, which may embarrass individual Ministers and impair collective responsibility, constitutes a further powerful reason for limiting attribution as narrowly as possible.

3. Members of the Secretariat are therefore asked, in writing minutes of Cabinet and Cabinet Committee discussions, to adhere as closely as possible to the general rule, and to make exceptions only in cases of strict necessity. Exceptions to the rule should be made only on the authority of the senior Secretary in a secretariat; and any cases of doubt should be referred for decision to the Secretary of the Cabinet.

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