

Prime Minister

Ref. A084/2053

PRIME MINISTER

Timetable for a Referendum

The interval between the publication of the White Paper on the referendum on membership of the European Community in 1975 and the date of the referendum itself was three months and ten days. This period could be somewhat curtailed, but probably (depending on the time required for Parliamentary debate on the Bill and the Order) not to much less than seven to eight weeks from the date of the decision to hold the referendum.

2. After it had been decided (presumably by Cabinet) to hold a referendum, there would be policy decisions to be taken on the franchise (Britons abroad, service voters, absentee voters), on the question and the layout of the ballot paper, on the conduct of the poll (returning officers for local elections or Parliamentary elections), on counting (local authority districts, Parliamentary constituencies, counties or centrally) and on the campaign. The Cabinet could be invited to take decisions on these matters one week after the decision to hold the referendum.

3. A Bill could then be drafted for introduction one week later. On publication of the Bill, the Stationery Office could be authorised to print poll cards and other stationery (time required two to three weeks); and negotiations on the fees payable to those organising the poll could begin (time required two to three weeks).

4. As the Bill would be a constitutional measure, all stages would have to be taken on the floor of the House. The Bill and the Referendum Order would presumably take not less than one to two weeks to pass (even that would be pushing it), unless the Opposition was willing to co-operate in its passage as in effect emergency legislation.

5. Once the Bill had received Royal Assent and the Referendum Order had been approved, ballot papers could be printed; that should take four to seven days. At least seven days would

therefore need to be allowed between Royal Assent and the last day for receipt of application for absent votes. That would be the date on which the formal election timetable began to run. Postal ballot papers could be issued a week after that, and polling day would be ten days thereafter.

4-5 weeks
5-6 weeks
7-8 weeks

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ROBERT ARMSTRONG

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