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CABINET: PROCEDURE

GENERAL ELECTION

Note by the Prime Minister

In accordance with custom when Parliament is to be dissolved, I am circulating certain general guidance for Ministers during the Election campaign.

2. During the campaign the Government retains its duty to govern and Ministers continue to be fully responsible for the work of their Departments. It is however customary for Ministers to observe reasonable discretion as regards the initiation of any new action of a continuing or long-term character and this applies particularly in circumstances where the Government no longer has a majority in the House of Commons. Similarly Ministers should exercise discretion over making new appointments, eg to statutory boards for which they are responsible. Major public appointments which are due to come into effect after the Election and have not yet been announced should not be proceeded with. In any cases of doubt Ministers should consult me even if the appointment is not one which normally requires consultation with me.

3. Attendance by Ministers at some international meetings will probably be essential, but discretion should be observed on new initiatives and Ministers should consider carefully before fulfilling any international commitments whether the subject matter is such that they can speak with the authority proper to a representative of Her Majesty's Government. Ministers attending eg the Council of Ministers of the European Community are, of course, fully entitled to continue to pursue existing Government policies.

4. The principle of collective responsibility continues to apply during the campaign, although it is natural to expect Ministers to range wider in their speeches than is normally customary.

5. In discharging Government engagements, Ministers should seek to avoid giving the impression that they are using them for party political purposes. I have circulated separate notes on broadcasting, press articles and interviews and the use of official transport during the Election campaign.

6. As is customary I am establishing an Election Business Committee. Its function is not to deal with ordinary Government business but to provide the means whereby enquiries from party headquarters are referred to Government Departments for advice, meeting the legitimate need of Government party candidates for accurate information from Whitehall sources and avoiding civil servants generally from becoming involved with party organisation. It can also, as necessary, provide advice on the response to enquiries from other candidates, pressure groups and members of the public. Experience suggests that most of the work of this Committee can be transacted in correspondence. I have invited the Lord Chancellor to chair the Committee and the other members will be:-

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Chancellor of the Exchequer
Lord Privy Seal
Secretary of State for Trade

Its terms of reference will be:-

"To provide a forum for the clearance of statements of policy by the Government; to co-ordinate, as appropriate, comments from Departments on the guidance prepared for the use of Government party candidates in dealing with enquiries put to them during the Election campaign; and to consider the replies by Departments to similar enquiries from Opposition party candidates, organisations and members of the public".

Detailed guidance will be issued separately to all Departments giving guidance on the submission of matters to the Committee and on the handling of constituency correspondence during the campaign.

M T

10 Downing Street

10 May 1983

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