



CC: HMT
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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

20 August 1986

off? / P.O.?

Dear Sir,

When you, Gerard Vaughan and Ian Lloyd came to see me on 17 July you kindly left with me a Report by the Science and Technology Group of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee on providing enhanced scientific support for Members of Parliament.

I have since had the opportunity to read it, and have noted with interest the comments on what is done for Congress and the proposals for a Parliamentary Office of Technology Assessment. As I said when we met, I think the assessment of the need, and general support, for any such addition to the existing Parliamentary information support resources must be primarily a matter for the two Houses. But I am sure that in making that assessment the Houses would wish to take account of the competing demands on financial resources, particularly in the light of the recent significant increase in the Office, Secretarial and Research Allowance. This has, of course, increased the amount available to individual Members for commissioning personal research. Since the Top Salaries Review Body is now reviewing this allowance and will, I am sure, be making arrangements to obtain the views of Members, you may like to let them know your views about the need for this type of facility for Members and how it might be financed.

As far as the specific point raised at our meeting is concerned, I am doubtful as to how far division of the

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Departmental Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts would facilitate the access which the Committee's Members already have to available scientific information and research. But no doubt you will be seeking the views of other Members on your proposals and this could be considered in that context.

I am sending a copy of the Group's Report, and of this letter, to the Cabinet colleagues referred to in the Conclusions and Recommendations (p.12).

Yours ever
Haycraft

Sir Trevor Skeet, M.P.

PRIME MINISTER

SCIENTIFIC ADVICE FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

You will recall that Trevor Skeet, Gerard Vaughan and Ian Lloyd came to see you on 17 July to argue the case for improved support for Members of Parliament on scientific issues.

They wanted a Parliamentary Office of Technology Assessment with a budget they estimated of £250,000. You were sceptical about this. I have consulted the Lord Privy Seal who strongly agrees with your scepticism. He points out that:

(i) the resources of the House Libraries and their Research Departments have increased fivefold in the last decade;

(ii) the individual Select Committees can now employ specialist advisers;

(iii) the research allowance has increased dramatically.

In these circumstances he advises that you should write back to the Members distancing yourself from this proposal and pointing out that the TSRB is looking into the facilities for research available to Members of Parliament. If you agree a draft letter is attached.

MEB

fu (Timothy Flesher)

7 August 1986

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PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

5 August 1986

Dear Tim,

You wrote to David Morris on 18 July ^{at 11:45} about a meeting which the Prime Minister held on 17 July with Sir Trevor Skeet, Sir Gerard Vaughan and Sir Ian Lloyd concerning their proposals for enhancing the scientific support available to Members of Parliament.

The main aim of what is being sought here appears to be Government funding for at least five years, and on an annual budget of some 200,000 to £250,000, for a new Parliamentary Office of Technology Assessment to operate on behalf of both Houses and under the auspices of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, as part of a general extension of that Committee's work. This proposal follows a visit by Committee members to the United States Congress, and envisages a scaled-down version of the present American Office.

The Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, on whose behalf the delegation of Members saw the Prime Minister, comprises Members of both Houses and non-Members. It is not a formal Parliamentary body. One of its objects is 'to provide Members of Parliament with authoritative scientific information from time to time in connection with debates'.

The present scientific information support resources available to Members include:

- (a) the resources of the House Libraries and their Research Departments. These have greatly expanded in recent years (eg a fivefold increase in Commons Library operating costs between 1974-5 and 1983-4), and their developments and staffing reflects Members' demands in particular fields of Parliamentary interest.
- (b) the power of individual Select Committees (including, for example, the Select Committee on Education, Science and the Arts) to employ specialist advisers 'to supply information which is not readily available', and
- (c) the commissioning of personal research, or the employment of a research assistant, paid for out of the secretarial allowance, recently much increased, that is payable to individual Members.

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Tim Flesher Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister

As the Prime Minister pointed out at the meeting, consideration of whether the existing sources of scientific information and research available to Members need to be supplemented, and if so, in what way, is essentially a matter for Parliament. If such supplementation on the lines suggested by the Parliamentary and Scientific Group was shown to be necessary, and was widely demanded, it would seem appropriate for it to be provided under the direct control of Parliament, in association with existing research resources; and, so far as the House of Commons was concerned, under the authority of the House of Commons Commission. The Lord Privy Seal is not aware of evidence of any such general demand.

On the specific suggestions made in the third paragraph of your letter, it would seem doubtful whether contributions from individual Members would provide a sufficiently secure financial basis for the establishment of the sort of Office which the Committee has in mind. Similarly, it is not clear how far the division of the Departmental Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts would facilitate the access which the Committee's Members already have to available scientific information and research.

In general, therefore, the Lord Privy Seal would suggest that the most appropriate way of handling this would be non-committal, leaving the onus for showing evidence of general support for their proposals with the Committee.

Accordingly, the Prime Minister may like to write to Sir Trevor Skeet as follows:

"When you, Gerard Vaughan and Ian Lloyd came to see me on 17 July you kindly left with me a Report by the Science and Technology Group of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee on providing enhanced scientific support for Members of Parliament.

I have since had the opportunity to read it, and have noted with interest the comments on what is done for Congress and the proposals for a Parliamentary Office of Technology Assessment. As I said when we met, I think the assessment of the need, and general support, for any such addition to the existing Parliamentary information support resources must be primarily a matter for the two Houses. But I am sure that in making that

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As far as the specific point raised at our meeting is concerned, I am doubtful as to how far division of the Departmental Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts would facilitate the access which the Committee's Members already have to available scientific information and research. But no doubt you will be seeking the views of other Members on your proposals and this could be considered in that context.

I am sending a copy of the Group's Report, and of this letter, to the Cabinet colleagues referred to in the Conclusions and Recommendations (p.12)."

*Yours,
Alison*

ALISON SMITH
Private Secretary

PM: Meeting with Sleet + Vaughan M's, July 8

