

Confidential Filing

Propriety of Ministers arranging briefing
for Conservative Backbenchers.

GOVERNMENT MACHINERY

December 1979

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
14.12.79							
10.11.58							
<p>PREM 19/2/196</p>							

Pome Minutes

2

See insert at X

mt

PRIME MINISTER

DEPARTMENTS' LINKS WITH CONSERVATIVE BACKBENCHERS

Following your talk with the Lord President and the Chief Whip about the importance of strengthening links between Departments and backbenchers, I suggest you make the following points to Cabinet after the discussion of The Queen's Speech:

1. This is another substantial legislative programme which will make considerable demands of our backbenchers.
2. It is essential that Cabinet Ministers take positive steps to enlist backbenchers' enthusiasm and support for these measures and the Government's programme generally.
3. To that end, each Cabinet Minister should devise his own programme for keeping in touch with backbenchers. Some Ministers do this already, but others could do more.
4. In particular, you should
 - draw in a loyal band of backbenchers who can be relied upon to give informed support to your departments' policies, both in the House, in the media and in the country generally. They cannot do that unless you give them the tools to do so;
 - maintain the closest possible contact with the Chairman and other officers of our backbench committees. Consult and talk to them. Listen to what they have to say.
5. As I say, some Ministers already do all this. But it should be standard practice for all of us.

X - and do not forget our backbenchers in the Lords.

6. I have asked the Lord President and the Chief Whip to see you all to discuss what needs to be done.

N.L.W.

N. L. WICKS

10 November 1988



Govt Machinery
file 16

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

14 December 1979

The Prime Minister has seen your exchange of correspondence with Alistair Pirie, about the provision of briefing for Conservative Backbenchers.

She is content with the guidance suggested in your letter of 13 December. I would be grateful if you could arrange for this to be more widely circulated in due course.

M. A. PATTISON

David Laughrin Esq
Civil Service Department

TTC

PRIME MINISTER

There was some discussion in Cabinet recently about the propriety of Ministers arranging briefing for Conservative backbenchers.

The Civil Service Department were called upon to rule on this under the last Government. They took the view that it would be improper for civil servants to provide a briefing service confined to the backbench MPs of one political party (although they could of course operate a service available to MPs of all parties). But the CSD considered that a service confined to backbenchers of one party would be in order if the arrangements and the cost were handled through the party organisation, with civil servants being involved only to the extent of providing factual information for the Minister. They concluded that it would be in order for special advisers to act as the channel through which the factual information was passed from a Minister to his party machinery: although special advisers are temporary civil servants, they have a special role on party opinion.

This bureaucratic but understandable reasoning has produced a sensible solution, and the CSD have suggested that the Treasury apply it for their present needs. In due course, guidance on these lines will be circulated to all Ministers if you are content with it.

MAP

Yes - Hanley on

ac6

13 December 1979

Mr. Whitmore *MAD*



To replace letter
of 11 December 79
- which should
be destroyed.

with compliments *done*

MR. DAVID LAUGHRIN

CIVIL SERVICE DEPARTMENT
Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AZ
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*Sir Ian Bancroft G.C.B.
Head of the Home Civil Service*

A C Pirie Esq
Private Secretary to the
Chief Secretary to the Treasury
HM Treasury
Treasury Chambers
Parliament Street
LONDON SW1P 3AG

13 December 1979

Dear Alistair,

Thank you for your letter of 5 December about the Prime Minister's request that briefing material should be passed to the Chairmen of Conservative back bench committees.

The general question of providing briefing material to back bench MPs has been considered on a number of occasions in the past. Under the normal conventions there seems no reason why material provided by civil servants for Ministers should not be distributed to back bench MPs provided it is of a kind that would be released to any bona fide enquirers. It would however be wholly improper for a briefing service confined to the back bench MPs of one political party to be provided on official stationery and operated by civil servants. It would on the other hand be in order for civil servants to provide information on the basis that MPs of all parties were aware of and had an opportunity to participate in the scheme. It follows that a service limited to back benchers of one party would be in order provided the arrangements for circulating factual information to back benchers are made by the Party concerned and the cost met by them, and provided civil servants are involved only to the extent of providing factual material for the Minister. A Special Adviser is a civil servant although it is recognised that in many cases one of the tasks of the Special Adviser is "....." to keep in touch with party opinion. Given this, we do not think it would be out of order for a Special Adviser to act as the intermediary through whom factual information intended for MPs of the party in power reached the point of distribution.

The basic principle involved is that civil servants should not be placed in a position where they might be criticised for favouring one political party; and your proposal appears to meet it - though of course possible criticism can never be ruled out.

We note your suggestion that departments might find it helpful to have some general guidance on this subject and we will consider what can be done.

I am copying this letter - and taking the liberty of sending a copy of yours - to Clive Whitmore.

Yours sincerely,
David

DAVID LAUGHRIN
Private Secretary



Treasury Chambers, Parliament Street, SW1P 3AG

Rt Hon Michael Jopling MP
Government Chief Whip
12 Downing Street
LONDON SW1

12 December 1979

Dear Michael,

You wrote to me on 8 November, saying that the Prime Minister would like the chairmen of Party committees to be sent extracts from the briefing prepared by my officials for my statement on public expenditure in 1980-81. I must apologise for not replying to it earlier. The request has raised one or two issues which needed careful examination.

We have had to consider, first, the propriety of supplying such information and the best way in which it might be undertaken. After seeking the advice of officials here and in the CSD, we have concluded that the proper way to proceed would be for this and any subsequent briefing for backbench committee chairmen to be passed to Conservative Research Department for editing, reproduction and distribution as appropriate. One of the Special Advisers here will be asked to take charge of the practical arrangements with officials here and of the transmission of the material to the Research Department. I imagine that it would be sensible to deal with other such requests in the same way.

Adam Ridley will accordingly be sending appropriate material drawn from the briefing to Research Department. However, the Treasury briefing was of course designed for Treasury Ministers, on the basis that other Ministers would be giving the details of their own programmes. It is therefore very thin on most of the individual programmes, and in some cases there was nothing whatever on the subjects with which some of the Party committees are concerned, eg Sports and Recreation. It would probably be useful for the committee chairmen to have copies of press notices issued by the spending Departments with which they are concerned, and in some cases there may be more detailed briefing prepared by the relevant Departments which it would be useful for them to have. I am therefore sending copies of this letter and yours to each of my Cabinet colleagues. The simplest way of meeting the PM's request would probably either be if they were to send any useful material direct to Alan Howarth

at CRD for onward transmission, or if the necessary material were collated and transmitted by your office or Angus Maude's.

I am sending copies of this letter to members of Cabinet, the Prime Minister and Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John Biffen". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

JOHN BIFFEN



Mr Davis. Advance
draft reply attached
DS
7/12

1 M McDONNELL
Mr Davis should
his brother draft reply
to Mr. Sloman please
J.P.
6/12
105

Treasury Chambers, Parliament Street, SW1P 3AG

D P Laughrin Esq
Private Secretary to the
Head of the Civil Service
Civil Service Department
Old Admiralty Building
Whitehall
SW1A 2AZ

5 December 1979

Dear David,

The Prime Minister has asked for briefing material about Public Expenditure which was prepared for Treasury Ministers to be passed to the Chairmen of Conservative back bench committees. This request was passed to the Chief Secretary by the Chief Whip in his letter of 8 November (copy attached).

The propriety of supplying such information and the best way of dealing with the request have been considered here, and the conclusion reached is that the relevant factual material should be passed to Conservative Research Department for them to distribute as they wish, the arrangements within the Treasury for assembling and transmitting the material being handled by one of the Special Advisers.

I should be grateful for your comments on this approach, and on the enclosed draft reply from the Chief Secretary to the Chief Whip which reflects it. The Chief Secretary wishes to write with the minimum of further delay, and it would be very helpful if you could comment quickly.

Since the issue which has arisen is a general one which may crop up in other contexts, it might be helpful if the Civil Service Department were to provide Departments with guidance about it in general terms. You may care to consider this at more leisure.

Yours sincerely,
Alistair Pirie

A C PIRIE
Private Secretary.

105/12

DRAFT LETTER FROM THE CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF WHIP

You wrote to me on 8 November, saying that the Prime Minister would like the chairmen of Party committees to be sent extracts from the briefing prepared by my officials for my statement on public expenditure in 1980-81. I must apologise for not replying to it earlier. The request has raised one or two issues which needed careful examination.

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