

CONFIDENTIAL



10
Home Affairs

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

18 June 1979

B/K 21-6-79
Went Hansard

The Prime Minister has seen the Lord President's minute of 15 June about Open Government.

She has noted the conclusions of the Home Affairs Committee, and she is content with the terms of the suggested Reply to a Parliamentary Question tabled for 20 June.

I am sending copies of this letter to John Chilcot (Home Office), John Stevens (Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Office) and Martin Vile (Cabinet Office).

re

M. A. PATTISON

Jim Buckley, Esq.,
Lord President's Office.

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PRIME MINISTER

Lord Soames' minute below reports the conclusions of discussion in H. Committee on Open Government. He has followed the line you approved earlier (see Flag A).

Are you content with the proposed oral Answer, which Mr. Channon would give on Wednesday next, setting out the Government's approach?

MAD

Ans.

16 June 1979



PRIME MINISTER

OPEN GOVERNMENT

Following my minute to you of 30 May on this subject, you invited me to put a paper to the Home and Social Affairs Committee, with the intention that the Government's view should be announced on 20 June when Paul Channon has to answer oral questions.

2. This I did, proposing that we should not concede a right of access to papers whether by legislation or through a Code of Practice, but should stand on the policy implied in the July 1977 letter to Permanent Secretaries issued by the then Sir Douglas Allen as Head of the Civil Service. This would commit us to the release, wherever possible, of background papers and analytical studies relevant to major policy decisions.
3. The Home Affairs Committee endorsed my proposal and invited me to report this conclusion to you with the terms of a suggested reply to a Parliamentary Question which I enclose.
4. If we are to succeed in holding the line and not be driven to make unwelcome concessions, it will be important that Ministers should take the initiative in publishing information, especially on major issues of Parliamentary interest, to the greatest possible extent. It will be for Ministers individually to decide whether particular material can be released in each specific case, but in my view it would be most valuable if you sent a minute to our colleagues telling them of the importance you attach to this aspect.
5. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy, and to Sir John Hunt.

S.

FOR ORAL ANSWER ON
WEDNESDAY 20 JUNE

Mr C Price (Labour, Lewisham West): To ask the Minister for the Civil Service, what proposals he now intends to bring forward to give the public the right of access to official information.

Mr J W Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr): To ask the Minister for the Civil Service, if he will make a statement on his policy for open government.

DRAFT ANSWER

MR PAUL CHANNON: With permission, I will answer Questions numbers and together.

The Government is committed to legislation to reform section 2 of the Official Secrets Act 1911, and in addition it will be the practice of this Government to make as much information as possible available, including background papers and analytical studies relevant to major policy decisions. Moreover, the House will shortly be debating the recommendations of the Procedure Committee which will enable the House to maintain and improve the scrutiny of the work of Government Departments. The Government shares the view of its predecessor that legislation to provide a public right of access would not be appropriate. A Code of Practice would be open to many of the same objections.