

CONFIDENTIAL

MR BUTLER

OFFICIAL INFORMATION

I promised you a note on the proposal to circulate an MPO paper on official information (dated October 8, 1982) to Cabinet for a second reading discussion.

MPO allowed me to make some comments in the course of the drafting of the October 8 paper. My objective, having failed to head off the idea of a paper to Cabinet, was to mitigate the damage. I had small success.

My position is quite simply this:

- there is no pressing need for an initiative at this time;
- the open Government lobby does not expect much from this Government;
- there is no means of satisfying the open Government lobby, not even by legislation, and we should not expend much effort in trying to satisfy the insatiable;
- any circulation of paper or discussion at Cabinet Committee or Cabinet level would almost certainly leak, put the Government on the defensive and be counter productive to the cause of greater openness;
- this Government, like its predecessors, is not in any case unduly secretive; a vast amount of information is churned out each day - the trouble with it is that it is often undigested, unprocessed and inconveniently packaged;
- we should stop being apologetic; we should present in the most favourable light the extent to which the Government already makes information available and argue much more systematically and persuasively the practical limits on the disclosure of information and in the process expose the true objectives of many in the open Government lobby - ie. to influence or most often prevent decisions which properly fall only to a democratically elected Government whose responsibility is to reconcile conflicting interests.

We are however now faced with a paper and it may be felt we should at least do something. I am clear what needs to be done:

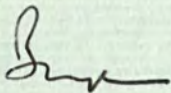
CONFIDENTIAL

- continue as now but quietly, when the opportunity arises, take a more positive line rather on the basis of Paragraph 6 of the paper, though treating point (c) very carefully indeed; this might be agreed by the Prime Minister with a small group of Ministers who could be furnished with a speaking note (which would be helpful to me as part of an exercise to colour people's thinking);
- take action administratively to identify the vast amount of unclassified information which can be made freely available ^{on computer} /- when we were able to open up the computer's store to the public we could reasonably present it as a substantive exercise not in open Government but in providing a service to the public (and at the same time promoting information technology).

I think the keys are to argue our present ^{position} quietly, unostentatiously but persuasively to those who can be influenced; and to mobilise modern technology greatly to improve the service to the public (which often confuses a lack of openness with the inconvenient way in which much Government information is made available.)

Against this background, I will not attempt to argue against a code of practice which, Ombudsman's involvement or not, is profoundly to be avoided.

I believe the Prime Minister strongly shares the views set out above.



B. INGHAM

17 November 1982