



file NB
Parliament

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

20 February 1980

Dear George,

Thank you so much for your letter of 7 February about the format of Prime Minister's Questions. You passed on the suggestion that the subject for a particular Question could be established by the first supplementary, so as to give a greater sense of coherence to Question Time.

I have given this idea some thought, but on reflection I have concluded that it would probably not be a success in practice. As you said yourself, Members are jealous of their right to put random and unexpected Questions, and I am sure that a sizeable minority would resist any change which restricted that freedom. Furthermore, the proposal would place the Chair in the position of having to determine throughout Questions whether a particular supplementary fell within the area which was defined by the first supplementary or not. This would give scope for procedural dispute and recrimination.

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Although the existing system is far from perfect, it seems to me that we have little alternative but to continue with it. I am sorry that more Members are not taking advantage of the opportunity to put down substantive, rather than open, Questions to me; perhaps we shall see a larger proportion as time goes by, so bringing about the change which has been suggested to you.

I should of course be delighted to consider any other changes in procedure which are proposed directly to you, and I hope that you will not hesitate to pass them on to me. I am most willing to look at any suggestion which has any degree of support in the House.

Yours ever

Margaret

The Rt. Hon. George Thomas, M.P.



Speaker's House Westminster London SW1A 0AA

7th February 1980

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Dear Margaret,

I have recently had an interesting suggestion about the handling of Prime Minister's Questions in the Chamber, and should be grateful for your views. The suggestion was based on the belief that the Open Question, as at present conducted, results in somewhat incoherent proceedings because:

- (a) successive supplementaries often raise totally disparate issues: if there is a dominant subject, it is frequently interrupted by supplementaries on other matters:
- (b) because any Member is free to raise virtually any subject, Questions become protracted and Members with Questions lower down on the Order Paper have no hope of being reached.

The suggestion that I have had is that the first supplementary (i.e. that raised by the Member tabling the Question) should establish the subject for that particular Question, and that when supplementaries on that subject had been exhausted, the Speaker should move on to the next Question.

As you know, attempts have been made before to rationalise arrangements for Open Questions, and have usually run into difficulty; principally because Members do not wish their right to put unscripted questions to the PM on any subject of their own choosing to be circumscribed. However, the new/

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the new proposal seems to me to have certain points in favour of it, not least in the sense that it gives better prospects to Members who have themselves taken the trouble to table Questions.

I should be grateful to know what you think.

Yours ever,
George.

Speaker

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP,
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