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Panel: PM's Questions

10 DOWNING STREET

4 February 1985

You will be aware that a piece of briefing requested for Prime Minister's Questions last Thursday about the 'Stray Soviet Missile' did not arrive until 2.55pm on a day when the Prime Minister also had a major speech. This briefing was requested at 8.30am to arrive by 12 noon.

The briefing the Ministry of Defence provides is always clear and well presented, and the effort which goes into producing it at such short notice is very much appreciated by the Prime Minister. If, however, it arrives beyond a time at which the Prime Minister can study it carefully and raise questions if necessary, much hard work will have been wasted and Mrs Thatcher might have to answer in the House without fully taking into account Departmental advice.

The 12 noon deadline is requested to enable all the briefing for that day's Questions to be assembled in time for the Prime Minister's lunchtime briefing meeting. Of course the system does allow some flexibility if a piece of briefing poses particular difficulties or if the issue has only become topical during the morning but I hope you will agree that cases such as that of last Thursday should be very much the exception.

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Private Secretary

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4. January 1985

Dear Tim,

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Thank you for your letter of 12 December. I am sorry that we did not anticipate the Leader of the Opposition's question to the Prime Minister about the allowance for YTS trainees. This had been discussed at the Manpower Services Commission's Youth Training Board the previous afternoon, but no conclusion had been reached.

We need to be more vigilant in future. Officials here have been reminded of the need to be particularly alert in watching for matters under discussion within the MSC which could become controversial and we have arranged that the Branch which has overall responsibility for relations with the MSC will keep a general oversight of matters arising so that information about potentially sensitive issues on MSC matters is drawn promptly to the attention of Ministers and No 10. We will keep this arrangement under review to ensure that it operates effectively.

Yours sincerely

David Normington.

D J NORMINGTON
Principal Private Secretary