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CWO

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

11 November 1985

*Dear Peter*

Thank you for your letter of 24 October about the ideas of the Select Committee on Procedure on the form for Prime Minister's Questions. I am writing to follow up the points I made during our talk last week.

Perhaps I might begin by stressing, as I did in my letter of 5 August, that I shall, of course, be willing to meet the wishes of the House in whatever decisions they reach on the form of Prime Minister's Questions. I must say however that having given further thought to your proposals, I see very considerable difficulties. You suggested that, provided substantive questions were tabled on the morning before Prime Minister's Questions, ie on Mondays and Wednesdays, that might be a sufficient period of notice. Such an arrangement would still, however, mean that departments would only have a period of a few hours to prepare draft replies, supplementaries and sufficient background material - often very extensive - to prepare me for a period of questioning lasting up to 5 minutes on a particular subject. Departments would, moreover, need to clear their material with their own Ministers. This notice



of less than a day is in sharp contrast with the 10 days' notice which is considered appropriate for questions to departments. If that period is considered right for departments the period of notice you propose is very short indeed, especially if the questions which are tabled raise complex issues or cover ground relatively unfamiliar to me.

An additional difficulty, to which I referred when we met, is that unless all the reachable questions on the Order Paper were highly restricted in their ambit, the work involved in preparing for them would be in addition to, and not in substitution for, the background briefing on the issues of the day which occupies all of the available time under the present system. Moreover, in practice, I suspect that even if there are restrictions on the traditional open question of the kind you suggest, such as a limit of one supplementary, new forms of open question are likely to evolve. For example, is a question along the lines of

"Will the Prime Minister make a statement on the level of public expenditure?"

to be regarded as a substantive or an open question? It is certainly a substantive question but has all the wide potential for the supplementaries of the open question. I do not believe that it would be either practicable or indeed desirable to restrict the ability of Members to table such questions yet it would take only one on the Order Paper for my workload and that of my staff in relation to Prime Minister's Questions to be very considerably increased.



All this leads me back to the point which I made in my letter to you of 5 August, that I am not seeking changes in the present arrangements. Indeed, I believe those arrangements represent the best available balance between the desire of the House to question the Prime Minister and the burdens which the system imposes on the Prime Minister and her staff. Were that balance to be substantially altered, it might well be difficult to avoid redressing it, for example by reverting to the practice of some of my predecessors of transferring questions much more often.

Yours ever  
Rogant

Sir Peter Emery MP





HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Office of the Leader of  
the Opposition

Prime Minister:

An under the  
table copy to  
Mr Kinnersley letter to  
Sir Peter Emery

14 November 1985

PE  
15/11

I was very disappointed that we were not able to meet today. I am sorry that our appointment had to be cancelled because of preparations I have been making for a visit to Sweden and West Germany. As I said I would be delighted to speak to you about the deliberations of the Select Committee on Procedure on the format of Prime Minister's Questions and I hope that a meeting can be arranged when I return to this country next week.

In the meantime could I say very briefly that my feelings are that the present arrangement of Prime Minister's Questions is satisfactory. I fully realise that your Committee will want to examine other possibilities and that eventually it will be a matter for the House of Commons, but the present system does provide a reasonable way in which the Leader of the Opposition can question the Prime Minister on the issues of the day and that the ability to ask supplementary questions is one which is very important in ensuring that Her Majesty's Opposition carries out its proper function of putting the policies of the Government under regular scrutiny.

I hope this brief note is helpful to you and look forward very much to our talk when it is arranged next week.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Peter Emery MP  
House of Commons  
London



PRIME MINISTER

CC MA  
BVP  
Ch/whp

Select Committee on Procedure: Sir Peter Emery

Sir Peter Emery has asked to see you to discuss further his Committee's proposals for Prime Minister's Questions. You will recall that you wrote to Sir Peter on 5 August and I attach a copy of that letter. Sir Peter has raised one small point arising from the letter but no doubt he will want to discuss wider issues as well.

The particular point he raises is the period of notice to be required for substantive questions. In your letter you say that 24 hours would pose problems. This is true, if we had notice of 20 substantive questions at 2.30pm on a Monday for example, we would have to commission answers and supplementaries from departments at about 2 or 3 hours notice in order to get them into your box. This would not make either for reasonable responses by departments or a proper input from No.10, partly because we would need, at the same time, to be providing general background briefing on current events. What Sir Peter proposes would be in addition to not in substitution for our normal work. The answer is not, as Sir Peter suggests, to have 48 hours notice: it is to retain the present system under which Members can put down substantive questions if they wish at the time questions go down.

More generally, it is clear that Sir Peter still hankers after changing the present system. The plain facts are however that:

- i) the present system has evolved because that is what Members want, and
- ii) the present arrangements are in your interests (and, indeed, those of the Leader of the Opposition).



Nobody really wants to change them apart from Sir Peter. All the flaws in the Select Committee proposals really stem from the fact that the Committee is seeking to impose on Members a system which it thinks they need for one which they actually want. The clinching argument against what Sir Peter proposes is that Members are perfectly free at present to put down substantive questions, <sup>T</sup>They don't do so. It suits us that they don't do so. Why tinker?

*Dr*

1 November 1985



DRAFT LETTER FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO SIR PETER EMERY CONCERNING  
PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME

Thank you for your letter of 24 October about the ideas of the Select Committee on Procedure on the form for Prime Minister's Questions. I am writing to follow up the points I made during our talk last week.

Perhaps I might begin by stressing, as I did in my letter of 5 August, that I shall, of course, be willing to meet the wishes of the House in whatever decisions they reach on the form of Prime Minister's Questions. I must say however that having given further thought to your proposals, I see very considerable difficulties for myself and my staff. You suggested that, provided substantive questions were tabled on the morning before Prime Minister's Questions, ie on Mondays and Wednesdays, that might be a sufficient period of notice. Such an arrangement would still, however, mean that departments would only have a period of a few hours to prepare draft replies, supplementaries and sufficient background material - often very extensive - to prepare me for a period of questioning lasting up to 5 minutes on a particular subject. Departments would, moreover, need to clear their material with their own Ministers. This notice of less than a day is in sharp contrast with the 10 days' notice which is considered appropriate for questions to departments. If that period is considered right for departments the period of notice you propose is very short indeed, especially if the questions which are tabled raise complex issues or cover ground relatively unfamiliar to me.



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"Will the Prime Minister make a statement on the level of public expenditure?"

to be regarded as a substantive or an open question? It is certainly a substantive question but has all the wide potential for the supplementaries of the open question. I do not believe that it would be either practicable or indeed desirable to restrict the ability of Members to table such questions yet it would take only one on the Order Paper for my workload and that of my staff in relation to Prime Minister's Questions to be very considerably increased.

All this leads me back to the point which I made in my letter to you of 5 August, that I am not seeking changes in the present arrangements. Indeed, I believe those arrangements represent the best available balance between the desire of the House to question the Prime Minister and the burdens which the system imposes on the Prime Minister and her staff. Were that balance to be



substantially altered, for example by the imposition of significantly greater burdens on the Prime Minister's Office, it might well be difficult to avoid redressing it, eg by reverting to the practice of some of my predecessors by transferring questions.



file



TOP COPY  
with  
Tessa

Tues. 19th  
3.45.  
+ Chief Whip

Pure Minutes

Sir Peter Ems

letter (attached) raises

24.10.85

a relatively simple  
point. But he would

like to see  
you.

Agree? yes  
no

Pear Margaret.

I wonder whether  
we could have no more

than ten minutes together

before you referred to the

enclosed letter? I would  
be very grateful.

15.45. 19/11 Always

+ Chief Whip

+ M.A.

6407

SUBJECT- Proceedings Committee  
on P.M.'s Questions



FROM SIR PETER EMERY M.P.



Top copy

file  
with  
Tessa.

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

24th October 1985

*Dear Margaret*

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE.

You were kind enough to reply at some length on the 5th August to my letter concerning the Procedure Committee's current enquiry concerning Question to the Prime Minister. It was only yesterday, at the first meeting of the Committee, that discussion could take place on the points which you raised.

There is just one point which the Committee would like to ask for possible amplification. Basically I believe that my members would like, in our Report, to put before the House any alternative or improvement that might sensibly and practically be devised to see whether the House wished to make any alterations to the present procedure.

One of the completely accepted facts about Prime Minister's Questions is the desire to keep them topical. John Biffen recognised this fact when he appeared before us and suggested that twenty-four hours would be an appropriate period for topicality to be maintained. The Committee on the whole accept this. However, in your letter you said "notice of only twenty-four hours would cause some problems for me." On the assumption that the twice weekly format of Questions to the Prime Minister continues, I wonder how real the problems would actually be for you and your officials, particularly as set against what might be seen as the considerable advantages for the House as a whole? After all, is not some notice for you and departments in preparing briefs better than no notice at all? Our particular concern is that a longer period, say forty-eight hours, would effectively mean that notice for a Tuesday would have to be given on a Friday.

We note what you say about the transfer of Questions. I know that the House has welcomed your readiness to accept any question and would understand if you felt compelled to change that practice if questions became too detailed. We do, however, envisage that many of the specific questions which would be likely to be tabled if our proposals were adopted would relate to major issues of the day and the preparation you might need would thus conceivably be little different from what it is at present.

*Always*

*John*

The Rt. Hon. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher M.P.  
10, Downing Street,  
London SW1A 2AA.





cc master set CC. M.A  
NW

10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

8 November 1985

The Prime Minister saw Sir Peter Emery together with the Chief Whip yesterday and promised to write to him setting out her views on Sir Peter's proposals for Prime minister's Questions. I attach a draft letter.

It seems to me that the time has come for a heavy shot across Sir Peter's bows. His proposals are not in our interests nor, I believe, is there any significant desire for them in the House. Moreover, they would involve considerable extra work for no apparent return. He proposes that the Prime Minister's Office should have approximately one day's notice of substantive questions. But departments have 10 days' notice. This cannot be right. Nor is it reasonable for us to ask departments to prepare replies, supplementaries and background material appropriate for a 5 minute exchange during the course of an afternoon, clear it with their Ministers and get it to us in time for the Prime Minister's overnight box.

The fact that open questions would not be ruled out (and indeed should not be ruled out) would inevitably mean that all this would be in addition to the Prime Minister's normal preparation for Questions and not in substitution for it.



Prime Minister's Question Time has always involved a balance between the wishes of the House and the Government. When questions put down to the Prime Minister in an earlier period became too detailed the Prime Minister transferred them. As a result the present compromise, under which the Prime Minister is willing to answer virtually any question as a supplementary but does not expect to be cross-examined in detail for 5 minutes on a specific subject unless given adequate notice, has evolved. What Sir Peter proposes will shift the balance. The inevitable result is that we will take steps to shift it back. This would involve transferring questions that we did not like the look of when we received notice of them and, when Government backbenchers are on the Order Paper, ensuring that they asked questions congenial to us. Neither is desirable (and I was alarmed to hear Sir Peter's acceptance of front bench manipulation, yesterday).

For all these reasons I think that we should now spell out to Sir Peter not just that we are sceptical about his proposals but also that we do not like them.

BT  
I should be grateful for the Chief Whip's views on this approach which is enshrined in the draft reply. I imagine that we are committed to getting the letter to Sir Peter by Tuesday morning.

Tim Flesher

Murdo Maclean Esq  
Chief Whip's Office