



10 DOWNING STREET

28 February 1986

Dear Christopher,

Thank you for your further letter of 20 February about Prime Minister's Questions.

I recognise of course that the arrangement you propose is an eminently sensible one and is a logical extension of that which we have agreed for the transfer of Questions directed to the Prime Minister simply because they cover the interests of more than one department. There is, however, a problem. At present, those departments not in the lead on a particular Question are content to accept that another department should answer on their behalf because that is what the Prime Minister's Office has requested. If this intermediate stage was omitted I suspect that they would be less willing to accept another department to answer on their behalf. I have particularly in mind the territorial departments of whose sensitivity on matters of this kind I am sure you are aware. It would not take many incidents where these sensitivities became engaged for the system to break down altogether which would inevitably lead to the Prime Minister once again having to answer all "inter-departmental questions" herself.

In view of this, and while the number of questions which we transfer remains small, I think we would prefer to stick to the arrangements set out in my previous letter which have not yet had long to prove themselves. Obviously, if there were a significant increase in the number of transferred Questions we would need to look again at the alternative proposals set out in your letter.

I hope that this is satisfactory.

Yours sincerely,
Nicky Roche.

Miss Nicky Roche
Parliamentary Clerk

Dr C R M Ward
Deputy Principal Clerk
Table Office
House of Commons



01-219 3303

TABLE OFFICE,
HOUSE OF COMMONS,
LONDON, S.W.1

20th February, 1986.

Dear Nicky,

Thank you for your letter of 7th February about transfer of Prime Minister's questions. Your proposed arrangements appear to be excellent and I am sure Members will appreciate the arrangements made to see that their questions, when transferred, still get full answers.

Whilst I originally thought, as you know, that it might be possible to avoid directing questions initially to the Prime Minister, I now have my doubts about this. The reason for this is that, if addressed straight to the lead department, they will have no means of knowing that the question would, but for the arrangements you have made, have been directed to the Prime Minister. Unnecessary transfers are work for departments, for the Table Office and for the printers^{the} I would be keen to eliminate. Is it possible to extend the arrangements you propose so that the lead department gives a full answer without the question going via the Prime Minister, making clear of course that material supplied by other departments is made available on the authority of these departments? My colleagues and I would then be able to advise Members that the question could properly be addressed direct to the lead department, confident that a full answer could be expected.

*Yours ever
Christopher.*

C.R.M. WARD
DEPUTY PRINCIPAL CLERK

Miss Nicky Roche,
Parliamentary Clerk,
10 Downing Street,
London, SW1.

PM's Questions file pi.

file



10 DOWNING STREET

7 February 1986

Dear Christopher,

Thank you for your letter of 20 January concerning the Prime Minister's policy on transferring Questions.

In the first category you mention the Prime Minister will transfer any Question that is wholly within the responsibility of another Minister. As you say there are obviously many areas of responsibility, on which the Prime Minister can rightly be expected to answer Questions; but on narrow departmental subjects it is the Prime Minister's practice to transfer such Questions to the appropriate Minister - some past examples are at annex A.

As to the second category of questions which you mention - those straddling the responsibilities of two or more departments, either on a territorial or functional basis - the position is more complex. Some time ago the Prime Minister noted that she was answering a large number of extremely detailed questions simply because they had been put down to her on the basis that they covered more than one department. This seemed even all the more anomalous since in each case we had asked a lead department to prepare the material for the question and provide a draft reply. In such cases it seemed unreasonable that the lead department itself should not reply to the question rather than involving the Prime Minister in a good deal of additional work. Accordingly we began a practice of transferring such questions.

I recognise, of course, that a case of the kind to which you refer in your letter in which a Member has his question transferred to a particular department which is then unable to reply on behalf of another department is galling to the Member concerned and embarrassing to the Table Office. We have raised the matter with the department concerned and they have expressed their regret that they gave a less than full reply. In order to avoid a recurrence of such replies we will ensure that, if we transfer questions of this kind in future we make it clear to the department concerned that they

are expected to reply fully, even if in doing so they make it clear that the material supplied by another department is made available on the authority of that department.

I hope this makes the position a little clearer. The Prime Minister is anxious to ensure that Members receive proper replies to their questions and if there is any difficulty I hope that you will not hesitate to get in touch with us.

Yours sincerely,
Nicky Roche

Miss Nicky Roche
Parliamentary Clerk

Dr C R M Ward
Deputy Principal Clerk
Table Office
House of Commons



01-219 3303

*Widney
we spoke*

TABLE OFFICE,
HOUSE OF COMMONS,
LONDON, S.W.1

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20th January, 1985⁶.

Dear Nicky,

We have been interested in the recent practice of the Prime Minister regarding transfers of questions. As you know, questions are required to be addressed to the Minister who is primarily responsible, and questions considered by departments to be misdirected are transferred by the Table Office on receipt of the appropriate notification. Thus, although the Table Office has no responsibility for particular transfers nor any part in the decisions, the practices and assumptions underlying transfers are of interest as they are relevant to areas in which Members ask our advice.

Apart from the few specific matters on which the Prime Minister alone can be considered the Minister primarily responsible, the questions which Members seek to table for answer by her fall into two fairly distinct categories. The first is questions which deal with matters for which a single Department appears to be responsible. Although such questions could equally be put down to a departmental Minister, our current practice is not to resist requests for such questions to be put to the Prime Minister. It is difficult to argue that, as head of the Government, she is not "primarily" responsible, and the Prime Minister is of course free to exercise her right to transfer such questions if she wishes. We had noted that she has recently decided to transfer rather more of these questions than she used to. The second category is questions which span the responsibilities of two or more Ministers, whether they relate to policy matters or comprise requests for statistics. This point most frequently arises in respect of matters where a responsibility is divided between Secretaries of State on a territorial basis. Our practice is, therefore, to set questions relating to policy or statistics down to the Prime Minister if the response sought must be drawn from two or more areas in respect of which different Ministers may be considered primarily responsible.

Transfers of questions in the first category are no problem. However, I noticed with interest recently that a question asking "What is the difference in the formula for allocation of resources for the National Health Service in rural areas between his department and the Scottish Office; and if he will make a statement" was transferred to the Secretary of State for Social Services. The Member originally sought to table this question to the Secretary of State for Wales but was advised that he had no responsibility for making such a comparison, having no responsibility for the allocation of NHS resources in Scotland. The question was, therefore, set down to the Prime Minister on the advice of this Office.

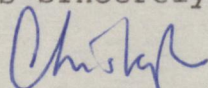
Whilst a necessary consequential textual amendment was, regrettably, overlooked in the process which changed the sense of the question, the underlying point remains the same. Drafted as it appears on the Order Paper, the question would not have been allowed to the Secretary of State for Social Services on precisely the same grounds as the original question was not allowed to the Secretary of State for Wales. The validity of these grounds was confirmed by the terms of the answer ultimately given by Mr. Hayhoe (OR 16th December, Col. 75-6) when he declined to comment on the allocation of resources for the National Health Service in Scotland.

You will, I am sure, appreciate that it is somewhat embarrassing for the Table Office if a question is not allowed on the grounds that it should be addressed to the Prime Minister, as spanning the responsibilities of departmental Ministers, only to be transferred subsequently by the Prime Minister to one of them. Also, a subsequent response from a Minister declining responsibility for some of the information requested does rather add insult to injury as regards the Member asking the question.

I should therefore welcome some guidance as to the factors the Prime Minister has in mind when deciding to transfer questions where the responsibilities involve more than one department, particularly where the split is territorial rather than functional. We shall then be able to advise Members more effectively on the best way to get the information they want. In particular, I hope in your response you will take into account the convenience seen by Members in being able to table such questions to the Prime Minister if it avoids them either getting answers saying some of the matters are the responsibility of another Minister (thus necessitating another question and the consequent delays) or having to table duplicate questions addressed to each Minister concerned. I should also be grateful if you would reflect on how a question such as the specific example I have cited can be fully answered if addressed other than to the Prime Minister.

I look forward to receiving your observations.

Yours sincerely,



C.R.M. WARD (DR).
DEPUTY PRINCIPAL CLERK

Ms. N. Roche,
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