

Parliament 4



Prime Minister

PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

MB

Mr Pym's review has not produced any
startling insights - He 5 November 1981
proposes no major changes,
but intends to use
informal contacts to promote
more focussed enquiries.
He also hopes to be able to
broaden the membership
of the Committees. MAP 5/81.

Dear Willie

REVIEW OF WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

In my letter to you of 21 May I referred to a review which I had put in hand of the work so far of the Departmental select committees, and invited the views of colleagues on various aspects of their experience of these select committees. I am extremely grateful for the response to this request and for the helpful suggestions put forward.

This review is now complete. Whilst, as anticipated, this shows that no generalisation can be applied equally to the fourteen committees, a clear consensus has nevertheless emerged, both at Ministerial and official level, that at best these committees have so far made only, as you say, "a modest but useful contribution" to improved Parliamentary scrutiny - and this sometimes at the expense of disproportionate Ministerial and official effort.

It is also evident that colleagues generally consider that these committees have rarely unearthed any significant new sources of information, and that there have only been a few examples - for example the report of the Home Affairs Committee on the SUS laws - where committee reports have directly led to measures which might not have been taken otherwise. There are, however, a number of other instances where reports have played a more or less important part in focussing attention on matters where policy changes were already under consideration.

A number of replies have expressed concern about the heavy burden of work, both on Ministers and on senior officials, caused by select committee enquiries, especially in the case of those into matters of topical interest that are already causing pressure on Departments. In this connection colleagues may be interested to see the attached assessment of the time spent by Departments between February 1980 and February 1981 on work connected with these committees.

.../...

The main lesson to be drawn from this review seems to be, therefore, that we must strongly resist any pressures for further developments of the select committee system at the present time, either through the creation of further committees or sub-committees, or by the extension of their powers. I share this view and propose to proceed accordingly.

Certain points have emerged, however, in the course of the review where we might be able to take initiatives which might help to make these committees, and their contribution to Parliamentary scrutiny, more effective, without causing additional work.

A number of these, such as the need for closer liaison between Departments and the Clerks of these committees regarding information about the likely areas of committee questioning at oral hearings, and the most appropriate and economic level of Departmental representation, are being pursued at official and informal levels.

There are, however, a number of other possible changes to which colleagues have drawn attention, particularly regarding the membership of these committees, which I would propose to consider further with a view to possible subsequent approaches to the Opposition and to the Chairman of the Committee of Selection. One particular aspect of this is the present exclusion from the membership of Departmental committees of officers of back-bench committees. There also seems to be a need for better liaison with Government backbenchers serving on these committees in order to improve the presentation of the Government's position in matters under their enquiry.

One other important deficiency in the work of the committees so far to which a number of colleagues have drawn attention is the unsystematic way in which several committees have gone about their choice of enquiry, and the waste of effort that has been caused by too generalised and unfocused an approach. Examples would appear to be the Industry and Trade Committee's enquiry into Imports and Exports and to the Environment Committee's report on Housing Policy.

How far it may be possible to channel the future activities of some of these committees more effectively must inevitably depend on the receptiveness of individual committees and their chairmen, and it seems likely that any general Government attempt to influence committees in this way would be strongly resented. Some committees, and their chairmen, may, however, be more receptive than others to informal Ministerial advice, and in such circumstances colleagues may wish to consider whether suggestions might be made to them about their future programmes of work. But experience would suggest that progress towards more effective enquiries is most likely to come through the day-to-day development of relations between Departments and committees and from the increasing experience and knowledge of committee members about their areas of scrutiny.

.../...

The existence of this review is publicly known. But since its conclusions point to little more than the confirmation of the existing select committee structure, I would not propose to make any formal announcement to the House about its completion. I have in mind, however, to take the opportunity provided by the debate on the Queen's Speech to confirm in effect that the Government recognises the continuing role of these committees in the overall structure of Parliamentary scrutiny, and will continue to co-operate with them. I also propose to place in the Library of the House some of the statistical material about the working of these committees, and the scale of official evidence to them, which has been assembled in the course of the review.

I am copying this to Cabinet colleagues, to the Chief Whip and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Francis Pym
Francis

FRANCIS PYM

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw CH MC MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1

ASSESSMENT OF THE TIME SPENT BY DEPARTMENTS ON DEPARTMENTAL
SELECT COMMITTEES

An exercise to assess the time spent on work by departments for Departmental Select Committees was carried out for the period 18 February 1980 to 15 February 1981.

Departments were asked to provide broad estimates of the time spent on Select Committee work; estimates were divided between work on the preparation of memoranda and time spent in briefing. These estimates were then further divided into four grade groups, Under Secretary and above; Assistant Secretary; Principal and Senior Executive and below. It was not the intention of the exercise to produce more than a broad brush assessment of the workload and the unit of work measurement used by departments was man days rather than man hours.

Overall Figures

Departments estimated that over the 12 month period

- (a) 6202 man days were devoted to the preparation of written memoranda.
- (b) 5837 man days were devoted to providing briefing
- (c) there were 62 appearances by Ministers
- (d) Officials made 790 appearances at 239 sessions.

Distribution by Grade

Departments gave the following estimates of breakdown by grade.

Preparation of Written Memoranda

| | <u>Man days</u> |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Under Secretary and above | 470 |
| Assistant Secretary | 927 |
| Principal | 2104 |
| Senior Executive and below | 2701 |
| | <u>6202</u> |

Provision of Briefing

| | <u>Man days</u> |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Under Secretary and above | 715 |
| Assistant Secretary | 1066 |
| Principal | 2121 |
| Senior Executive and below | 1935 |
| | <u>5837</u> |

Broad indication of cost

A broad estimate of the costs involved was obtained by applying basic staff costs (including an element for accommodation) to the departmental estimates of man days by grade spent on the preparation of memoranda and provision of briefing.

- (a) estimated cost of written memoranda = £673,300
- (b) estimated cost of time spent on briefing = £676,700
- (c) total estimated cost = £1,350,000

These totals do not include any allowance for Ministers' or Officials' appearances before Select Committees.

COMMITTEE EXPENSES

Costs of specialist advisers to Departmental select committees and days at work

| <u>Financial Year</u> | <u>Total Cost</u> | <u>Days worked</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1979-80 | £8,150.77 | 155 $\frac{3}{4}$ |
| 1980-81 | £126,937.62 | 2,425 $\frac{1}{4}$ |

[Source Parliamentary Reply by Mr Arthur Bottomley on behalf of the House of Commons Commission to Mr Bruce George (OR, 25 June, 1981, Col. WA 195)]

Cost of travel by Departmental select committees

| <u>Committee</u> | <u>Visits Abroad</u> | | <u>Visits within United Kingdom</u> | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | <u>No.</u> | <u>Total cost to date</u> <u>£</u> | <u>No.</u> | <u>Total cost to date</u> <u>£</u> |
| Agriculture | 4 | 7,489 | 6 | 3,858 |
| Defence | 3 | 12,583 | 9 | 6,975 |
| Education Science and Arts | 4 | 11,470 | 23 | 2,013 |
| Employment | 2 | 11,025 | 12 | 5,050 |
| Energy | 3 | 18,542 | 6 | 1,030 |
| Environment | — | — | 1 | 23 |
| Foreign Affairs* | 5 | 34,179 | — | — |
| Home Affairs† | 1 | 8,011 | 6 | 1,411 |
| Industry and Trade | 2 | 31,006 | — | — |
| Scottish Affairs | 1 | 1,915 | 20 | 8,153 |
| Social Services | 1 | 200 | 6 | 3,985 |
| Transport | 2 | 3,072 | 2 | 19 |
| Treasury and Civil Service‡ | — | — | — | — |
| Welsh Affairs | — | — | 2 | 1,338 |

* Including Sub-Committee on Overseas Development.

† Including Sub-Committee on Race Relations and Immigration.

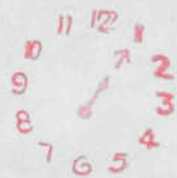
‡ Including Treasury and Civil Service Sub-Committee.

[Source Parliamentary Reply by Mr Arthur Bottomley on behalf of the House of Commons Commission to Mr Bruce George (OR, 25 June, 1981, Col. WA 196)]

Cost of transcripts of evidence and printing (1979-1980)

| Committee | Transcripts of evidence | Printing (Gross) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Agriculture | 4,158 | 66,240 |
| Defence | 4,837 | 29,520 |
| Education, Science and Arts | 5,601 | 127,440 |
| Employment | 5,348 | 46,800 |
| Energy | 6,368 | 51,840 |
| Environment | 2,412 | 31,440 |
| Foreign Affairs | 4,490 | 98,880 |
| OD Sub-Co. | 3,556 | 22,080 |
| Home Affairs | 3,123 | 81,120 |
| RR & I Sub-Co. | 3,895 | 65,280 |
| Industry and Trade | 8,074 | 62,160 |
| Scottish Affairs | 5,551 | 71,280 |
| Social Services | 3,844 | 158,160 |
| Transport | 6,827 | 51,840 |
| Treasury and Civil Service | 8,150 | 70,560 |
| T & CS Sub-Co | 2,072 | 24,960 |
| Welsh Affairs | 5,740 | 83,520 |

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Parliament

✓ MP

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

ELIZABETH HOUSE, YORK ROAD, LONDON SE1 7PH

TELEPHONE 01-928 9222

FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
 Lord President of the Council
 Privy Council Office
 Whitehall
 London SW1A 2AT

19 January 1982

Jan Francis

REVIEW OF THE WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

I have seen Janet Young's letter of 11 January to you in which she suggests that you might take up with Edward du Cann some of the problems we experience in getting adequate advance notice of the line of questioning planned by Select Committees for sessions with Ministers.

We have an informal arrangement with the Clerks to the Education, Science and Arts Committee to receive advance notice of the topics to be covered in such sessions. Often the information we receive from them only arrives at a late stage and is then very vague. Consequently my officials are forced to prepare a good deal of detailed briefing material which is subsequently proved to be unnecessary. I do not believe that this is solely the fault of the Clerks; they often admit that Committee members themselves have been no more precise in expressing their intentions. But it is certainly wasteful of the time both of Ministers and officials.

I therefore agree with Janet Young that this problem is worth raising with Edward du Cann in the way she suggests.

I am copying this letter to Cabinet colleagues, the Chief Whip and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours

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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND WELFARE
112 WEST 57th STREET, NEW YORK 19, N.Y.
ATTENTION: DIRECTOR
FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

11 9 JAN 1952



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Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

The Leader of the House of Commons
House of Commons
LONDON SW1

Management and Personnel Office
Whitehall London SW1A 2AZ
Telephone 01-273 4400
GTN 273

11 January 1982

Parliament 2
Prime Minister
Sensible proposals from
Lady Young.

Sen Francis,

MF

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REVIEW OF THE WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 5 November to Willie Whitelaw. Although I was not involved in the early stages of the review I think that it has been a most useful exercise.

One point in particular concerns me and I suspect, reading between the lines of his letter, also Geoffrey Howe, whose letter of 22 November I have seen. It is clear from the review that Departments expend a great deal of time and effort on the preparation of briefs for Ministers and officials appearing before Select Committees. On some occasions this briefing has to be unnecessarily comprehensive and detailed simply because officials have been unable to ascertain the line of questioning which a Committee is likely to take and therefore cover all possibilities. Some departments have, I understand, an informal arrangement with the Committee Clerks whereby they receive advance warning of the proposed questions for oral evidence; but even then there is no certainty that a Committee will stick to the declared line, so officials still tend to brief copiously on a contingency basis.

I suspect that the lack of co-operation between Committees and those examined which is implicit in this situation stems from the early days of the Committees. But now I would hope that we might persuade them that experience of the last two years has shown that witnesses are increasingly willing to co-operate and be forthcoming, and that in practice are able to give the Committee far better and fuller information if the main lines of questioning are known in advance.

I understand that you are to meet Edward du Cann, in his capacity as Chairman of the Liaison Committee, next week. I wonder whether you might usefully raise this matter with him? Obviously it needs to be made clear that we in no way wish to curtail the investigative powers of the Committees, but are genuinely concerned to improve the effectiveness of oral evidence sessions - and I strongly believe it to be the case that a line of questioning better defined in advance would do so. At the very least, we might seek his co-operation in

persuading Committee Chairmen that their Committees should stick to any questions of which they have given advance notice; and in persuading those Committees that do not customarily give any advance notice of questions that they would benefit by doing so. It would be still better if we could develop more structured and systematic contacts between Committees and Departments on the line and scope of questioning to be pursued at each oral session. I think we might also usefully put Edward on warning that we shall be encouraging Departments to be a little less encyclopaedic in their approach, to concentrate more upon thorough in-depth briefing on key issues, and to be readier to admit ignorance and to offer written evidence on unforeseen points raised by Committee members. This last may even be welcomed by Committees.

I hope that you will see advantage in raising these points with Edward. I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

Yours ever
Paul

BARONESS YOUNG

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Pym

PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE
WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AT

11 January 1982

Dear Pym,

REVIEW OF WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

Thank you for your letter of 22 December about this review.

As you point out, a clear general consensus does appear to have emerged in this review, both at Ministerial and official level, about the record so far of these committees, and about the points of criticism that can be usefully pursued.

I saw Philip Holland last month and expressed our general views on the membership of the committees, and in particular about the de facto exclusion of officers of back-bench committees. He undertook to bear what I said in mind. I also propose to see Edward du Cann when the House returns to discuss with him a number of other select committee matters, including relevant parts of the report. Other aspects are being pursued at official level.

As you suggest, I will be considering further the publication of parts of the report in the light of the outcome of the current discussions. I agree that it might well be useful to have a further review of the work of these committees in due course.

I am copying this letter to the other recipients of yours.

Yours truly
Francis Pym

FRANCIS PYM

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
Treasury Chambers
Parliament Street
London SW1



Parliament

MA

Treasury Chambers, Parliament Street, SW1P 3AG
01-233 3000

22 December 1981

The Rt. Hon. Francis Pym MC MP
Lord President of the Council

Dear Francis

REVIEW OF WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

Thank you for sending me a copy of your letter of 5 November to Willie Whitelaw.

This review has been a useful exercise. It has, I think, established that there is a good deal of agreement among us on the lessons to be learned from our experience with Departmental Select Committees over the last two years. I note that the various points that have emerged are being followed up in different ways, and I welcome this. You will recall that in my letter to you of 11 August I suggested that, without piling work on work, it might be valuable if there were another review in a couple of years time, to see how the system, modified as may be, is then working; and I still think this would be a good idea.

One small point. You say in your letter that you have it in mind to place in the Library of the House some of the statistical material about the workings of the Committees, and scale of official evidence to them, which has been assembled in the course of the review. Obviously you may need to judge this in the context of the tactics of getting the various substantive changes accepted. Subject to that, I myself would welcome this sort of publication, as part of the process of educating people - not least the Committees themselves - about the costs and burdens which the system places on the Government machine. In the present atmosphere, the more this becomes clear, the better.

I am copying this letter to the other recipients of yours.

Geoffrey Howe

GEOFFREY HOWE

22 DEC 1981



*Parliament**42*

Department of Education and Science

Elizabeth House York Road
London SE1 7PHOffice of Arts and Libraries
From the Minister for the Arts

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Telegrams: Aristides London SE1
Tel: 01-928 9222

10th September 1981

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MC MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Privy Council Office
68 Whitehall
LONDON SW1

*Prime Minister**MS**12**1981**Dear Chancellor,*

You asked in May that colleagues should send you their views as to how the Departmental Select Committees have been working. As you know, the Education, Science and the Arts Committee has taken a great deal of interest in the Arts. I am sending you a separate return since my experience with the Committee has been quite different from Mark Carlisle's and indeed that of most of our colleagues.

The Education Select Committee has several members on it who take an interest in the Arts. Although they are not allowed under the rules to form a sub-committee, in effect they have an informal arrangement whereby Patrick Cormack takes the chair at meetings concerned with the Arts and only a small number of members turn up. As you know, Patrick Cormack is Chairman of the Backbench Arts Committee but under the rules he is not debarred from being a member of the Education Select Committee as he is not an officer of the Backbench Education Committee itself. I have found it tremendously useful that the Chairman of the Party Committee should also be a member of the Select Committee and I do strongly support what Geoffrey Howe said in his letter to you of 11 August that it would be sensible to allow the inclusion on Select Committees of officers of the Backbench Subject Committees.

On the whole, Arts policy over the years has remained relatively non-controversial. So members of the Select Committee have not divided on party lines. Indeed their interim report on Works of Art was unanimous. They tend to agree on all the major issues. As I think has always been the case, the less partisan the problem the better job a Select Committee does.

There are of course considerable disadvantages in the present system. The Committee have caused a lot of work to my officials and to me, not all of it ^{very} productive. One reason for this is that the Committee's own staff work does not seem particularly good. Another is that they wander off the point. I do not think they have interested the public or the House very much in their work. But they are quite prepared to talk to me informally before a full-scale enquiry is launched. Their work has on the whole been very constructive and they appear to be anxious to take an objective and sensible role. I think I ought to

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put this on record since my experience seems to be somewhat different to that of some of my colleagues and quite different from my experience with the Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee when I had to deal with them last year.

Copies of this letter go to the recipients of yours.

Yours sincerely
Paul Channon

for

PAUL CHANNON

Dictated by Mr Channon and
signed in his absence.

10 SEP 1981

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QUEEN ANNE'S GATE LONDON SW1H 9AT

Dear Francis

9 September 1981

MS

Ann [unclear]

REVIEW OF WORK OF DEPARTMENTAL SELECT COMMITTEES

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I am replying to your letter of 21st May about the review of the work of the Departmental Select Committees. I have had the opportunity of seeing our colleagues' observations.

The Home Affairs Committee has on the whole been helpful, and while I would not wish to propose any extension of the role of the Committees, and thereby further increase the burden on Departments, I believe that on present evidence the balance of advantage lies in allowing the system to continue.

The Home Affairs Committee has produced some reports which have undoubtedly raised the tone of informed public debate. The recent report on prisons is likely to assist me in securing acceptance for what might otherwise be somewhat controversial policy developments. Earlier reports have served to defuse difficult situations. The Committee's consideration of deaths in police custody was of great value in helping us to deal with a mounting Parliamentary and public campaign against the police and their Report effectively brought the public debate to an end. One report has led directly to a change in the law: the report on Race Relations and the "Sus" law made it necessary for us to repeal "Sus" in the Criminal Attempts Bill and put us under pressure to introduce the Bill in the following session. You will remember that the Committee had threatened to bring in a Bill of its own if we did not signal our intention of doing so.

I also find it encouraging that in three of the reports the Committee has been prepared to refrain from making any recommendations, in sharp contrast to the normal experience with advisory committees.

I would readily admit that the Committee has not been able to tell the Department anything strikingly new (although the fact that some reports have gathered previously available material together for the first time has been useful).

Whether all this represents an overall improvement in Parliamentary control over the executive is more difficult to say. Obviously when the Committee embarks on an inquiry Ministers and officials are called to account. I would not underrate the importance of the existence of the Committee in raising the level of general political awareness among senior civil servants, and in exposing them physically to some of the pressures of Parliamentary opinion (even though the approach adopted by the Home Affairs Committee has been influenced to some extent by outside advisers operating behind the scenes, who are not themselves accountable to anybody!). But, generally speaking, although a Parliamentary body producing reports on Home Office subjects will obviously have influence, I doubt whether the existence of the Select Committee stands out as a major factor, separate from Parliamentary scrutiny generally, in influencing decision making on Home Office issues.

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The Rt. Hon. Francis Pym, M.C., M.P.

In forming a balanced judgement of the work of the Committees it is important to adopt a realistic criterion. We should not dismiss the Committees' contribution on the basis that they have not demonstrably resulted in any dramatic improvements in our present arrangements for fact-finding and accountability. The real question is whether the Committees have brought about any useful changes, albeit minor, and how far they have improved the mutual understanding and interplay of Parliament and the executive. In this sense I would certainly regard the Home Affairs Committee as having made a modest but useful contribution. Certainly the Committee could have made a real nuisance of itself and may yet do so; Home Office issues lend themselves to instant criticisms and controversy. But the Home Office has gone out of its way to handle the Committee with kid gloves and to avoid any clash or friction with them. This has been one factor in keeping our affairs on a relatively even keel in Parliamentary and public terms over the last two-and-a-half years.

A major problem is the demands which the Select Committees make on resources, bearing in mind that many of their members do not agree with the Government's policies on Civil Service manpower and public expenditure. There are two aspects of this problem. First, the burden imposed on Ministers and officials by the preparation and giving of evidence to the Committees and the preparation of Departmental replies to reports. This is without doubt very substantial, although one should not overlook the fact that the Committees have to some extent only taken over the role previously performed by the Expenditure Committee. Secondly, reports from the Committees calling for increased resources to be devoted to a particular area, and pressure for these reports to be implemented. The Home Affairs Committee took the Home Office to task in their first report in the current session for failing to implement proposals made by various committees over the past eight years. In our reply (Cmnd. 8214) we made the point that the Select Committee appeared to have failed to appreciate that such proposals had to be judged in the light of the policies of the Government of the day and the resources available. We certainly could not be committed to implementing the proposals made in reports submitted to our predecessors.

A way of limiting the burden on resources and at the same time deriving benefit from the existence of the new Select Committees is to seek to involve them in subjects on which the Government needs in any event to take action, and to steer them away from areas to which we cannot afford to devote resources at the present time. This is easier said than done, not least because, as past experience with standing Departmental Advisory Councils has shown, there is a limit to the number of subjects which, from the Government's point of view, a body of this sort can usefully consider. I suspect that the time may come when the Committees, having exhausted the obvious topics for review, are in effect looking round for fresh subjects to occupy themselves.

One final point worth mentioning is that any initial tendency of Government supporters on the Committee to fall in with the views of Opposition members for the

/sake of an

sake of an appearance of solidarity, independence and consensus, rather than to exercise their own judgement, seems to be waning: all the Government supporters except the chairman were willing to end the enquiry into vagrancy offences at an early stage with a report recommending no immediate action.

Copies of this letter go to the recipients of yours.

W. M. L. M.
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10 SEP 1981

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

ELIZABETH HOUSE, YORK ROAD, LONDON SE1 7PH

TELEPHONE 01-928 9222

FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
 Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
 68 Whitehall
 LONDON SW1A 2AT

7 September 1981

MS, MS
Francis

Ann Whitelaw

You will be interested in the Cabinet's criticisms of the education select committee, which has been one of the most expensive also.

Your letter of 21 May to Willie Whitelaw invited the views of colleagues on the operation of Departmental Select Committees. I am of course concerned with the Education, Science and Arts Committee and you will also know that Paul Channon is to write to you separately about his own dealings on the Arts side with the same Committee.

We have so far had three reports falling for reply on the education side. All were the product of the Committee's inquiry into the Organisation and Funding of Higher Education - the first, a single issue report on the Government policy on overseas student fees, the second, discussing wider aspects of higher education and making recommendations for change in the organisation of public sector higher education. Besides these, the Committee produced a Special Report in which they criticised the Department for its failure to produce certain papers they requested (leading, as you know, to the adoption of a firm Government stance in reply). While, as my officials have acknowledged, some parts of the main report on the Organisation and Funding of Higher Education contained discussion relevant to an issue of major policy interest at the time I cannot pretend that the recommendations made were of any help to us in policy development.

These are early days to reach a proper judgement on the Committee and I continue to hold out hopes that they will settle down to a more constructive pattern of work. I would emphasise that the Committees have clearly attempted to be non-party-political in this approach; I have been fortunate in that the Conservatives on the Committee have been diligent in their attendance. But it is hard to resist the impression that some members on the Committee, particularly the Chairman regard the Committee's activities as a valuable opportunity to gain publicity while grinding their own axes. The Chairman is known for the zeal with which he seeks to further the cause of "open Government" and the past year has seen a succession of attempts by the Committee to gain access to papers bearing on the advice tendered to me and to my colleagues. Little apparent use is made of documents thus solicited. Details of some of the main instances are in the evidence prepared by my officials and, as I mentioned above, this aspect of the Committee's activities has already led to the Government

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having to make a firm response on one occasion. We are now considering a further demand from the Committee to know of correspondence passing between the Chairman of the University Grants Committee and myself - coupled with a request for me to give oral evidence pertaining to it early in the new session. This continuing attempt to shift the line between what is made available to the Committee and what is withheld seems likely to lead to a series of fruitless confrontations.

All these activities have given rise to much unproductive work by senior officers in the Department which is tiresome at a time when we are seeking to reduce civil service numbers and promote greater efficiency. Nor is it easy to say that the substantial amount of time devoted to preparing memoranda and giving evidence for the Committee's scrutiny sessions and main inquiries has been more profitably spent. If the oral sessions, when they took place, could be regarded as well informed and constructive, this burden could reasonably be accepted. But the questioning encountered both by me and by my officials has been, in general, ill-focussed and often ill-informed.

That leads me to agree, firstly, with Geoffrey Howe's suggestion that we should think again about whether it is right to continue to exclude officers of back bench subject committees from membership of corresponding Select Committees. Much of the time we seem to be educating the Committee members rather than extending the knowledge of interested parties outside Parliament (many of whom will already be highly expert in the subjects under discussion). The conduct of proceedings suggests to me that the quality of special advisers to the Committees leaves a certain amount to be desired, ~~but~~ that Members of the Committee take little advantage of their presence.

All in all, therefore, I consider that the Education Committee has made an unimpressive start - and a surprisingly expensive one, too, if the figures in the attachment to your letter are anything to go by. But at the same time I would not wish to overlook the function fulfilled by the Committee in acting as a channel of expression for the views of outside interest groups although I would have hoped that outside groups would have been subjected to at least the same rigour of cross questioning as exponents of Government policy. The Committee's activities have not yet led to better informed discussion in Parliament - nor have they brought to light new and valuable factual information helpful to the Department, though I do accept that the Committee have encouraged the Department to make public some information which otherwise it might not have done. In general, however, I do not feel that public accountability has increased.

Copies of this letter go to recipients of yours.

Yours ever

Mark

MARK CARLISLE

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SEP 8 1981

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