

Ref: A083/0624

CONFIDENTIAL

MR. BUTLER

Prime Minister

Agree with the line which
it is recommended that
MOD officials should take
before the Defence Select Committee?

Select Committee on Defence:
Inquiry into Positive Vetting

FEES

23.2.

The Select Committee on Defence (Chairman Sir Timothy Kitson) is conducting an inquiry into positive vetting as it applies to members of the Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence civilian staff.

2. The Select Committee sent the Ministry of Defence a questionnaire, which the Ministry have answered in a memorandum which was agreed with the Departments concerned and approved by the Secretary of State for Defence.

3. The Ministry of Defence is likely to be asked to give oral evidence to the Select Committee next month. I have discussed with the Permanent Secretaries concerned and the Director General of the Security Service some of the questions which are likely to be raised.

4. The purpose of this minute is to tell the Prime Minister how it is proposed to deal with such questions.

5. One of the questions in the questionnaire was to ask what is the difference in procedure between positive and negative vetting. The answer read as follows:

"Positive vetting consists of checks against records and a full field investigation which includes interviews with the subject, supervisors, referees and previous employers. For access to less sensitive information a more limited range of checks is made."

6. There is in fact no such thing as negative vetting. As the answer implies there is a system of more limited checks for access to less sensitive information, which is known as "normal vetting" (NV). NV consists of checks with departmental employment records, Security Service records and police records. It does not involve any process of investigation by means of interviews of referees of colleagues. Over the years there have been a number of public references to the existence of another vetting process besides

CONFIDENTIAL

positive vetting (PV) which is of course overt, in the sense that the individual concerned knows that it is happening. Successive Governments have always taken the view that the details of NV, and so far as possible its existence, should remain confidential. If the system had to be declared and details disclosed, that would undoubtedly lead to pressure for an appeals procedure, which would imperil Security Service sources, which it is necessary to protect; and an overt procedure would also call into question the use of checks with the police, who co-operate on the understanding that the practice remains confidential.

7. The Security Commission, in its last report, endorsed the view that NV should continue to be covert and that the nature of the NV checks should not be disclosed. For obvious reasons this recommendation was not included in the published statement of the Commission's findings.

8. The arguments for not disclosing the details of the NV process, and for keeping the process itself covert so far as possible, remain valid, and we are agreed that this line should be maintained in oral evidence to the Select Committee on Defence. The Ministry of Defence officials will therefore refuse to go beyond the written answer already given and quoted above.

9. Once the Select Committee realise - as we think they have not yet done - that, though the Ministry of Defence carries out positive vetting investigations, the policy is laid down centrally, they may press for more information about central policy and practice. The Ministry of Defence officials will of course be able to answer for anything which is public knowledge, or for questions related to the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces. We think that the Committee should be given no encouragement to probe further than that into general policy on PV. The object should be to avoid officials from the central Departments or from the Security Service having to give evidence to the Committee.

10. Finally, the Select Committee may ask about the strengths and weaknesses of the PV process. The process is under renewed scrutiny by the Security Commission, in the course of its inquiry

CONFIDENTIAL

into the Prime, Ritchie and Aldritch cases, and we think that the Select Committee should be discouraged from trying to cover the same ground, at least ahead of the report of the Security Commission. Ministry of Defence officials will therefore not go beyond what the Prime Minister has already said in answer to Supplementary Questions on 11th November, 1982, when she made her statement on the Prime case.

Statement
attached.

11. I am sending copies of this minute to the Private Secretaries to the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence.

R. Armstrong
Approved by
Robert Armstrong
and signed in his absence.

22nd February 1983

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

SELECT COMMITTEE ON DEFENCE :
INQUIRY INTO POSITIVE VETTING

The Prime Minister has seen your minute of 22 February to me (A083/0624) and agrees the line which it is recommended that MOD officials should take before the Defence Select Committee in their inquiry into positive vetting.

I am copying this minute to the recipients of yours.

F.R.B.

24 February 1983

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