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Prime Minister  
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PRIME MINISTER

SCRUTINY PROGRAMME 1980: WORK OF B4 DIVISION, HOME OFFICE

1. This scrutiny was conducted under the supervision of Mr Timothy Raison MP by Mr T G Weiler, a recently retired Under Secretary. You asked me to take a particular interest in it on your behalf.

2. B4 is a Division of the Immigration and Nationality Department. It processes applications for naturalisation or registration as a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies. More details and the outcome of the scrutiny are given in the Annex.

3. This minute invites you to take note of the scrutiny and comments on one particular aspect of it, namely delay in processing applications.

The scrutiny

4. The staff of B4 work under great pressure. I was therefore pleased to see several references in the report creditable to them, eg the competence and courtesy of the personal enquiries team, the staff's concern for thoroughness and efficiency and the competence of the Certificates and Oaths Section.

5. The scrutiny was undertaken because of the time it takes to process an application (up to 26 months in some cases). It was profoundly affected by two things I did not know of before it began. A reorganisation of case work already planned took effect on the day it started, while the White Paper on Nationality Law published last July disposed of options which might otherwise have been available.



6. Mr Weiler's report therefore amounted, in his own words, to "an extensive spring cleaning" rather than radical changes. Substantial savings are accordingly not in prospect. Nonetheless, the report suggested more effective procedures. It should contribute to better staff morale. The scrutiny also had a catalytic value: certain changes recommended by the examining officer were made while he was still at work.

#### Delay in processing applications


7. Other changes have been considered since the report was submitted.

8. After the completion of enquiries into those applications where the decision rests on the personal suitability of the applicant, both London and provincial applications will now be placed in a single queue for final processing. This will cut down on one of the two main causes of delay, namely the operation of a "first come, first served" principle. Although introduced for fairness's sake, that principle has since become unreasonable owing to delays in assessing the suitability of London-based applicants.

9. The second cause of delay is that it takes the Metropolitan Police Force, which deals with one-third of all naturalisation cases, on average ten months to make its enquiries. Provincial forces take four months. The Force has been falling behind at the rate of about 100 applications a month, but hopes that a recently introduced experiment, in which certain cases are chosen for a modified enquiry procedure, will show considerable savings in time and cost. I understand that first results are very encouraging.

10. Another option which is being pursued is the employment of retired Police Officers as investigators. (Last year's scrutiny of Vehicle Excise Duty Enforcement showed that some 70 such people were then employed by the Department of Transport as Inquiry Officers in the London area in substitution for the Metropolitan Police. That scrutiny, which I hope will be the

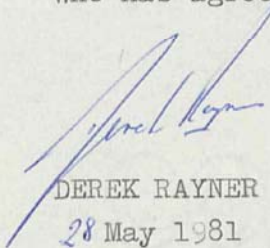




subject of a separate submission presently, recommended, however, that the complement of Inquiry Officers should be reduced by 30 or so because they generated more work than the London Enforcement Office as a whole could cope with).


11. The Home Office is following up this proposal with the Civil Service Department. While the burden on the Metropolitan Police Force is welcome to a degree - because some enquiries have a significant bearing on security or crime prevention - it seems wrong to accept so long a delay as ten months when applicants are contributing to the cost of the Home Office's services.

12. I am copying this minute and its annex to Mr Raison, who has agreed the terms in which they are expressed.

  
DEREK RAYNER

28 May 1981

Annex: Delays in the Handling of Applications for Naturalisation and for Registration as a Citizen of the UK and Colonies



## ANNEX

### DELAYS IN THE HANDLING OF APPLICATIONS FOR NATURALISATION AND FOR REGISTRATION AS A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND COLONIES

1. The scrutiny reviewed the functions performed by B4 Division in the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office at Croydon to see what scope there might be for streamlining the processes involved and making changes to provide a more efficient and economical service.

#### Background

2. The Division deals with individual applications for naturalisation or registration as a citizen of the UK and Colonies. At the start of the scrutiny the staff complement was 217, but by its close it had been reduced to 212 as a contribution to manpower savings. Although the complement has since been increased again to 222, partly to cover extra work connected with the British Nationality Bill, there are only 213 now in post owing to resource constraints. There were 48,600 new applications in 1979 (50,500 in 1980) and 53,350 enquiries in 1979 (62,450 in 1980). Fees are charged to cover administrative costs.

3. The work of B4 is demand-led and constrained by factors beyond its control, notably that the flow of applications cannot be stemmed by a moratorium, quota or ranking because that would be politically impracticable.

4. Until 1973 applications were mainly of two sorts. Decisions on naturalisation applications were (and continue to be ) discretionary, based on suitability, and registration used to follow as an entitlement once eligibility had been established from the application. Since 1973, however, suitability has also become a requirement for certain categories of registration, and the time to process applications has lengthened accordingly.



5. In 1979 arrears of work began to accumulate drastically and various measures were taken to correct this. They increased output significantly in certain areas of work but could not match the increase in registration applications and still left considerable arrears. Naturalisation and discretionary registrations were taking 2 years 2 months and other registrations between 4 - 12 months at the time of the scrutiny and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration drew attention to delays in one of his reports last year.

6. Last year's White Paper on Nationality Law indicated that the balance will shift even further from entitlement to discretion related to suitability. There is no firm basis on which to predict further levels of applications but a high level must be expected up to the operative date of new legislation and under its transitional provisions. Moreover this is likely to persist as long as there is political uncertainty elsewhere in the world making the possession of a UK passport attractive.

7. Where the test is suitability the several stages through which an applicant must go consist chiefly of completing a detailed application form, then enquiries mainly by the police. Only at the last, when naturalisation or registration are granted, does the applicant pay the appropriate fee. The time scale is variable depending some times on the applicant replying to requests for further information, but mainly on the length of time taken by the Metropolitan Police Force and the operation of a "first come, first served" principle at the stage of "final consideration" following the enquiries.

#### The problems

8. The problems identified relate to:
- a. Making the best of the staff who can be recruited in Croydon, where there was a high turnover at the time of the scrutiny.
  - b. Further streamlining procedures within the Division.



- c. The management of casework.
  - d. The level and collection of fees.
  - e. The causes of major delays.
9. The results of the review of the problems covered by a - d above were aptly described by the examining officer as being "the equivalent of an extensive spring-cleaning, rather than the identification of changes which would produce a radical reduction in staff resources".
10. There would have been scope for substantial savings if the criteria for citizenship had been changed in ways other than those announced in the White Paper of July 1980.
11. However, the recommendations should when implemented make better use of hard-pressed staff and speed up casework, with swifter collection of more fees. At present only 40% of the costs are being recovered.
12. With regard to delays, the report made very useful recommendations for eliminating the collection of excessive or inappropriate detail during police enquiries as to the "suitability" of applicants but left open two issues:
- a. The Metropolitan Police deal with about one-third of all the naturalisation enquiries. They take on average about 10 months, whereas provincial police forces take 4 months. This raised the question whether the use of the time of serving police officers in the Capital is justified.
  - b. Although provincial forces complete their enquiries faster than the Metropolitan, this does not secure the applicant any speedier consideration in the Division because of the operation of the "first come, first served" principle.



13. The Home Office has now disposed of the latter problem by moving to deal with applications in order of the date of police and other enquiries. This means that the position of provincial applicants in the queue will no longer be worsened by older applications from the London area taking precedence and, incidentally, that the Division will be able to deal with applications on the basis of information which is fresh and up-to-date.

14. The Home Office has also made enquiries about the employment of retired police officers to substitute for serving policemen in the Metropolitan area - where, on the current annual intake of some 3,300 London applications, the Metropolitan Police has been falling behind at the rate of some 100 applications a month.

15. The Home Office estimates that it would need 27 full-time officers to clear 3,000 applications a year; believes that they would certainly be useful; and thinks that it would be able to recruit them, assuming CSD Ministers agreed. The main difficulty is whether, given the manpower policy, it is right to seek equivalent savings elsewhere in the Home Office to make room for these officers.

16. Home Office Ministers have agreed instead to a 6-month experiment whereby selected applicants are not subject to the usual full range of enquiries and interview by the Metropolitan Police. If the experiment is successful, there is the prospect of major savings in time and cost. The Home Office view is that this is a more profitable option at present than the employment of retired police officers.

17. Even so, the numbers of applications for discretionary registration are increasing rapidly and the indications are that they will soon have overtaken naturalisations. Retired police officers could be of great value in the near future assisting the Immigration Service with the enquiries into these applications in the London area, and thus reduce the likelihood of excessive delays arising similar to those which have been encountered on naturalisation.