

Mrs. Thatcher's Bill
on the Admission of the Press to Meetings of Public Bodies
Note of a Meeting with the Local Authority Associations
on 18th January, 1960
The Minister in the Chair

A list of those present is attached.

1. The Minister said that he was in no way responsible for Mrs. Thatcher's proposed Bill. In his own view the best way of improving relations between public bodies and the Press lay in the general acceptance of a code of conduct, and, indeed when the Bill became law, he intended to issue a circular with it which would embody a code of principle, drafted in the light of consultations with the associations. All, however, that was now open to him was to seek to persuade Mrs. Thatcher to modify her Bill so that it would not disrupt the proceedings of local authorities. This task was made easier by the fact that the Government had agreed to have the Bill drafted for her, though it had to be noted that neither they nor she were committed to accepting the Bill as drafted. If, indeed, the Government tried to exert too much pressure on Mrs. Thatcher, she might well abandon the present proposals and introduce Sir John Simon's former Bill on the subject, which would be much less to the liking of the associations.
2. The Minister said that sanctions might be introduced into the Bill, though there were difficulties in this. He was doubtful whether they could be altogether dispensed with after the action taken by certain local authorities last year in excluding the Press from their meetings. The Bill would also prevent the practice of whole councils going into committee simply to exclude the Press from their proceedings; the associations would be glad to hear, however, that it was thought this could be achieved without giving the Press any general right of admission to all committees of an authority consisting of all the members of that authority.
3. The Minister finally assured the associations that he would himself speak on the Bill when it came before the House and that the associations views would be borne in mind.
4. Sir Francis Hill of the A.M.C. speaking for all the associations, said that they were generally opposed to Mrs. Thatcher's Bill. Legislation in this field would be always open to evasion, and the object of the Bill could not be achieved without the goodwill of local authorities. The Bill was based on a false analogy between committees of local authorities, which were executive bodies, and standing committees of the House of Commons, which was a legislative body. The proposal that the Press should be admitted to meetings of committees exercising delegated powers was accepted in principle, but there would be difficulties in practice in view of the confidential character of much committee business and the need in emergency for ad hoc delegation of powers.
5. Bodies covered by the Bill
The Secretary, in answer to a question from the C.C.A., said that the Home Secretary was inclined to accept the application of the Bill to Watch Committees, Standing Joint Committees, and Probation Committees (though not committees of Probation Committees).
6. The C.C.A. expressed the hope that Magistrates Court Committees and Probation Committees would be excluded from the Bill. The position of these committees was different from that of Standing Joint Committees
7. The Minister pointed out that Mrs. Thatcher was particularly anxious to secure the admission of the Press to meetings of Watch Committees and Standing Joint Committees.
8. Committees with a Substantial Volume of Delegated Business.

The A.M.C. said that the ^{distinction} ~~division~~ contemplated between delegated and non-delegated business was not realistic, since so much delegated business was of a

kind that should not be discussed in front of the Press. Mrs Thatcher had been too much influenced by the particular case of Birmingham Corporation which delegated most of its functions to committees.

9. The Secretary said that the provisions of the draft Bill regarding these committees were in fact designed to meet the objection made by the associations, and in particular, the type of case where ad hoc powers had to be delegated in an emergency.

10. The C.C.A. said that the proposed provision would give a right of admission to the meetings of almost every committee of a county council.

11. All the Associations pressed for some provision, which would restrict the right of admission to times when delegated business was being discussed, or which would enable committees to split their agenda into two parts, one comprising delegated business, and the other non-delegated business, and to exclude the Press from discussion of the latter.

12. The Secretary said that it would smack of evasive tactics to write such a provision into the Bill. The associations should consider whether their object could not be attained under the Bill as it now stood by the division of each committee concerned into two committees, one dealing with delegated business, and the other with non-delegated business. The press could then be completely excluded from meetings of the latter.

13. If the associations agreed this was feasible, authorities would probably have time to make the necessary adjustments in their committee organization before the Bill came into force on September 1st. If the time limit was too short, it might be possible to extend it. If, on the other hand, they did not think this procedure feasible, it was up to them to arrange for an appropriate amendment to be made to the Bill when it was before the House.

14. The Associations agreed to this alternative but pointed to the difficulty that arose in connection with compulsorily established committees.

15. Application of the Bill to Sub-Committees

The Minister in answer to a question from the C.C.A. said that the Bill could not be qualified to exclude sub-committees exercising delegated functions. The whole purpose of the Bill was to give the Press a general right to hear discussion of delegated business.

16. The A.M.C. pointed out that only three types of sub-committee were in question. Sub-committees exercising delegated powers normally had the legal status of committees.

Public Notice of Meetings and Issue of Agenda

The C.C.A. and the A.M.C. queried the need for publication of agenda and documents to be left to the option of the authority.

17. The Secretary pointed out that the provision was simply to secure that the Press were adequately informed of matters to be discussed. This could be done either by sending a detailed statement or a copy of the agenda with supporting documents. (If the former action were taken, there would be no need to enclose committee or officers' reports). Public notice of meetings need not be given in newspapers, but only on notice boards either at council offices or in other public places.

18. The C.C.A. suggested that it would be unduly onerous if local authorities were saddled with standing requests for notification of meetings from a large number of newspapers which might not very interested in the general run of council business.

19. The Minister said he did not sympathize with this attitude. Public bodies must be prepared to take trouble in their relations with the Press

Provision of Facilities for the Press

20. There was some concern as to whether it would be possible to comply with the provisions of the Bill on this point.

21. The Secretary said that requirements would subject to what was practicable in the circumstances.

J. Lintley 19 Jan. 1960.