

Prime Minister

Would you be content for Sir Robert Armstrong to write as proposed?
to Permanent Secretaries

Would you want him to enlist the support of previous Prime Ministers?

Agree that the letter should not be published in answer to an arranged P.Q.

FERB
13.7.

Yes

No

Not to be published

Ref. A083/2060

PRIME MINISTER

In my minute of 10 June (A083/1625) about the leaks of Government documents during the Election campaign, I told you that I was considering what we might do, apart from measures to discourage and detect leaks, to try to reverse the change of culture in this area. By Mr Butler's minute of 16 June you said that you would favour a letter from me to Permanent Secretaries on the lines indicated in paragraph 9(a) of my minute, and did not favour a letter to The Times or a Committee of Privy Counsellors.

2. I share your aversion to a letter to The Times. I also agree that we should not set up a Committee of Privy Counsellors: the standards and conventions that ought to apply are perfectly clear.

3. I therefore propose to write a letter to Permanent Secretaries on the lines of the draft attached, which is the result of discussion with one or two senior colleagues (including the Treasury Solicitor). I hope you will agree that I should write accordingly.

4. I thought that it might be worth trying to enlist the support of your predecessors for this stand. I could do this by sending them copies of the letter, and expressing the hope that, if opportunities arise, they would welcome and endorse it.

5. I expect that the letter will leak, and if it does you will be questioned about it. There might be something to be said for pre-empting that by publishing the text of the letter in a Written Answer to an arranged Parliamentary Question. But you may think that that would attach more status and importance to the letter than it rates.

No

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Approved by
ROBERT ARMSTRONG
and signed in his absence


12 July 1983



DRAFT LETTER FROM SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG TO
P E MIDDLETON ESQ, HM TREASURY

I know that all our Permanent Secretary colleagues were as dismayed as you and I were by the series of leaks of Government documents during the General Election campaign, to the Press and in some cases, it seems, to political parties. They can only have been deliberately perpetrated with the object of embarrassing members of the Government party in the conduct of their campaign; and most if not all of them must have been perpetrated by civil servants. They were an intolerable breach of trust, and they put at risk the Civil Service's position and standing as a non-political public service.

It is not so much a matter of the Official Secrets Acts - though no doubt those were being breached - as a matter of professional duty and loyalty. In any walk of life an employee has a duty to keep his employer's confidences and the Civil Service is no exception to that. There can be no justification or excuse for passing out a document, or indeed for orally disclosing information, which is entrusted to an employee in confidence. If it is done for money, it is an act of corruption. If it is done for political or for personal motives, it is an act of disloyalty



which reflects a corrupt sense of values, and the person concerned had better seek employment where he can pursue the causes in which he believes without breaching his employer's confidences: it is not for civil servants to play politics. Whatever the motive, the perpetrator forfeits the trust placed on him when he accepts employment, and with it the right to continue in that employment.

If the Civil Service is to deserve the trust which Ministers, and those who may at some future date be Ministers, have traditionally placed in it, and if it is to retain the confidence of Parliament and the public as being a non-political service of government, we have to reassert the values and the sense of professional obligation and loyalty which will make such leaks unacceptable and unthinkable at any time. And that applies not just to the deliberately leaked document, but also to the information communicated orally to the journalist or to someone else outside the service, with the intention or in the knowledge that disclosure will be damaging or embarrassing to the Government.

This is in no way inconsistent with a commitment to openness in Government. In pursuit of greater openness of Government and wider public understanding of the Government's policies and decisions, an increasing amount of documentary material is being published by



the Government, and to the same end. Many civil servants^{are} expected and even asked from time to time to talk to people outside the Government (including journalists). But this duty must be discharged responsibly, not mischievously, not in breach of confidence, nor to the prejudice or embarrassment of Ministers or of our colleagues.

The responsibility rests on us, as Heads of our Departments and professions in the service, to reassert the need for a right sense of values in these matters, and the need to respect the obligations of trust placed upon us as employees of the Crown. Each of us will want to find his own way of doing this in our own Departments, and in our dealings with people outside our own Departments. I am clear that we cannot allow this to go by default. It is a matter which requires positive action by all of us, each in his own way and at his own time; and it is a responsibility we cannot shirk.

I am sending copies of this letter to all Permanent Secretaries.