

FILE

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Minister

Subject



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

26 June 1981

Dear Private Secretary,

Ministers' Visits Overseas

This letter is to remind Departments of the need to consult the FCO at Private Secretary level as early as possible in the planning of Ministerial visits overseas.

On a number of occasions recently, the FCO has only learned relatively late in the day that a Minister from another Department is planning an overseas visit. This is not simply a bureaucratic quibble. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary feel strongly that maximum benefit will only be derived from Ministerial visits overseas if these visits are carefully targetted.

To achieve this, it is essential for all Departments to follow Section VI of "Questions of Procedure for Ministers". As this section makes quite clear, the Foreign Office must be consulted, and through it the diplomatic post concerned, at the outset of planning for a Ministerial visit, by Private Secretary letter.

I should stress that it is not sufficient for Departments to consult posts directly without informing the FCO, to inform the FCO at desk level, or to inform the FCO when formal approval from the Prime Minister and the Whips is requested.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries to Ministers in charge of Departments and to David Wright (Cabinet Office). I should be grateful if copy recipients could ensure that this letter is shown to all Ministerial Private Offices within their Departments.

Yours sincerely,

William Rickett

The Private Secretary



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

24 June 1981

PERSONAL

Dear Wilke,

Ministers' Visits Overseas

As you know, on a number of recent occasions the FCO has only learnt relatively late in the day that a Minister from another Department is planning an overseas visit. In the case of the recent visits by the Secretary of State and Minister of State for Defence to Washington, HM Ambassador at Washington heard rumours of the visits from the Americans and from members of his defence staff long before we were able to give him official confirmation through FCO channels. Another example was the recent visit to South America by the Parliamentary Secretary at the Department of Transport. The FCO had heard indirectly that Mr Clarke was planning to visit South America long before the first official intimation in Anthony Mayer's letter of 9 April to Mike Pattison. The Department of Transport in fact sent telegrams about the visit directly to our Embassies in Argentina, Chile and Venezuela in March and again in April. A further example has cropped up this week, in the letter from the Department of Energy to you seeking approval for a visit to Japan and India in September. The Department of Energy, like the other Departments mentioned above (and we could quote other examples) have not first consulted the FCO by Private Secretary letter at the earliest possible stage, as laid down in Section VI of "Questions of Procedure for Ministers".

This is not merely a bureaucratic quibble. On a number of occasions the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has had doubts about the utility or the timing of a Ministerial visit overseas, but has discovered that arrangements for the visit are so far advanced that it would cause embarrassment to his colleagues and to the host government for him to intervene. If the maximum benefit is to be derived from Ministerial visits
/overseas



overseas, the visits should be carefully targetted (as the Prime Minister herself pointed out following her tour of the Gulf) and we should seek the advice of our diplomatic posts on the best possible timing. We cannot coordinate our advice effectively if, as in the case of the Department of Transport, Home Departments send telegrams about visits directly to Ambassadors without informing the FCO: or if, as in the case of the Department of Energy, a junior FCO official is told in vague terms that a visit is under consideration, but is specifically enjoined not to consult the Ambassador concerned.

We therefore think it would be useful if you could draw the attention of Private Offices in all Home Departments to Section VI of "Questions of Procedure". Without of course referring to specific examples (for the sinners named above are not alone, but merely those who have come to notice recently) you may wish to stress that it is essential to consult the FCO (and through it, the diplomatic post concerned) at the outset of planning for a Ministerial visit, by Private Secretary letter. It is not sufficient to inform the FCO officially of a visit at the relatively late stage when formal approval from the Prime Minister and the Whips is normally requested.

yours ever

Roderic Lyne

(R M J Lyne)
Private Secretary

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