

Written evidence from Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (PM 02)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office

I do not favour a Prime Minister's Department. We already have the Cabinet Office designed to service the machinery of government, ensure proper collective discussion and decision making, supervising and providing personnel support for the civil service and leading on some designated cross departmental themes and policies.

I do favour a small staff of loyal and energetic advisers assisting the Prime Minister in his or her main roles. When I took on the twin tasks of Head of the Policy Unit and Economic Adviser to Margaret Thatcher I offered her a service based on the tasks before her and her needs to define and use the power of the office to provide strategic direction and leadership to the government. She needed briefs on issues where departments were in dispute and her chairmanship was required to resolve the disagreements. She needed updates on where agreed strategic policies had got to in the Whitehall labyrinth, and help with identifying and pulling together cross government policies. She needed assistance with responses to crises. Given her vision of an enterprise U.K. with a smaller state and a freer people, I worked up for her, for example , a substantial privatisation programme, a series of linked policies to promote jobs and enterprise to tackle unemployment, the idea of ownership for everyone and welfare reform.

The role of Chairman to resolve issues of significance and conflicts between departments sometimes needed a brief saying back the Chancellor to save the money or a brief to back the spending department against the Treasury. The role of managing a crisis led to the Policy Unit's active engagement in troubles like the Miners' strike. The role of leading with a vision of the future produced the PM's big speeches on freedom, enterprise, ownership, growth and sound finances.

The Downing Street team was kept small so that we all fitted into No 10 itself and all had good access to the PM. Everything we did was in her name and reflected her wishes or agreement. As a civil service unit we did not trespass on party matters which were handled by the Political Secretary and did not brief the press as if we had views and a life independent of the PM. Ministers and departments knew we knew the mind of the PM. We communicated her views to Whitehall through her Private Secretaries letters and by putting meetings in the diary for her direct dialogue with Ministers.

I met her weekly to update her on progress and warn her of what was coming up, as well as seeing her regularly at Cabinet Committee meetings where we had briefed, at meetings with others in her study, at speech writing sessions and social events in No 10. It was this regular access and daily exchange of written communications on the main topics before her which she valued. She kindly said at one review of our service that I instigated that she felt she got a lot done with us to help.

In my role as Economic Adviser I needed to offer her insight into Treasury thinking, highlight successes and errors, whilst assisting her to have a good working relationship with the Chancellor. Their aims were usually aligned. The worst difficulty arose over the Exchange Rate Mechanism, where I advised of its considerable dangers to the U.K. economy

against the Treasury who were keen on it. The Treasury's decision to shadow the DM without collective agreement to join the mechanism caused tensions. It was a long time after I left that the Treasury finally insisted against her wishes on joining, which led on to the tragic and predictable damage to the U.K. economy under her successor.

November 2020