



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

11th March, 2008

Dear Mr. Strachan,

Thank you very much for your recent e-mail reminding me that I had expressed an intention to submit a written response to your request for evidence. I regret to say that I still have not got the time to do a full formal and researched submission to you. I hope that your team will not object if I just give you a short informal response.

Because of my "elder statesman" role in politics, I am beginning to be concerned about suggestions that the 30-year rule should be relaxed, so that records of previous administrations are produced whilst members of those administrations are still in active politics. I have already been going for more than 30 years and I first became a Departmental Minister 29 years ago. I do not have any skeletons in the cupboard that I can recall, although I no doubt made many mistakes. My fear is a general one, that the current climate of politics will lead to the media and politicians researching the records in order to obtain material for use in contemporary political debate. I do not think that history and posterity are deprived of proper national records, assuming that Departments are still exercising reasonable care in keeping them. The appetite for more recent material tends to come from journalists and political researchers trying to find material with which to beat people who are sometimes leading figures in current politics over the head.

Even here, my main fear is not the embarrassment which would be caused to one or two of my colleagues and other Ministers in future years. I do think that the Freedom of Information Act is already causing Ministers and officials to take decisions in un-minuted meetings and in a less formal way. I suspect that the records which

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Governments are leaving behind them today will contain much less frank disclosure of events than they used to. I suspect that the minutes of meetings now are minutes of formal gatherings, confirming decisions that have been taken elsewhere. Even if my fears are exaggerated, a shortening of the 30-year rule will inevitably add to the incentive that already exists, to leave less of a trail behind the administration, so that critics and opponents cannot use it in campaigns against the Ministers concerned. At least the 30-year rule always meant that Ministers were comparatively indifferent to the risks, as the majority of them were bound to find that they were no longer active in public life by the time that the record came out.

I hope this short note is useful. The current fashion is to demand openness and to scorn secrecy or confidentiality of every kind. In my opinion, there are dangers to this.

Yours sincerely,

L. C. G.

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