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Prime Minister

This deal looks
both acceptable to the
Government and equitable
in Parliamentary terms.

PRIME MINISTER

Yes no

Agree to Mr Biffen's
proposal?

PARLIAMENTARY TIME FOR OPPOSITION PARTIES

✓ 23/4

1. Colleagues will be aware that the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties have since the last election made frequent complaints that the amount of time they command on the Floor of the House does not reflect the extent of their support in the country. Their discontent has centred on the fact that they can choose a subject for debate only when the Labour Party are prepared to make an Opposition Day, or half-day, available: and argue that they should have a formal right to a certain amount of time in each session.

2. At the beginning of this session it became clear that Alliance Members were prepared to use procedural devices to impede the normal progress of Commons business, as a way of drawing attention to their grievance. Any prolonged use of such tactics would have seriously complicated the management of the business of the House. In addition it could have placed the Government in a bad light: those outside Parliament might find it difficult to understand why the smaller parties should be forced to depend on the goodwill of the Labour Opposition. Accordingly, when winding up the debate on the Loyal Address I indicated (O.R. 13 November 1984, Col 619-620) that discussions would take place through the usual channels to see whether a satisfactory solution could be found.

3. Those discussions are now complete. The Labour and Alliance Parties are prepared to accept a proposal that 3 Opposition Days should be offered to the Leader of the second largest Opposition Party in the House, who will dispose of them in consultation with the other minority Parties. The Ulster Unionist Party would wish to be excluded from these arrangements and would continue to negotiate with the Official Opposition for debating time. The Government would increase the number of allotted Opposition Days from 19 to 20.

4. The Chief Whip and I believe that this is a favourable outcome for the Government, providing as it does a measure of insurance against continued disruption at the price of only one additional day of Parliamentary time: while the number of days at the disposal of the Labour Party will be reduced from 19 to 17. I therefore propose to introduce in the near future a Resolution amending the relevant Standing Order to give effect to this agreement.

5. I am copying this minute to all Cabinet colleagues, the Chief Whip and Sir Robert Armstrong.

W. J. B.

W J B

22 April 1985

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24 April 1985

PARLIAMENTARY TIME FOR OPPOSITION PARTIES

This is just to record that the Prime Minister was content with the Lord Privy Seal's proposals on Parliamentary time for Opposition parties set out in his minute of 22 April.

Timothy Flesher

David Morris, Esq.,
Lord Privy Seal's Office.

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