



Nicola Beckford
BBC Political Programmes

Your ref: 425/6
Our ref: FOI244383

Dear Ms Beckford,

14 August 2006

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

Thank you for your email of 17 July in which you requested, under the Freedom of Information Act, the following information:

(a) Details of all committees chaired by John Prescott to include the name of the committee and the date since 28 April 2006; and

Part (a): Details of all committees chaired by John Prescott since 28 April 2006

I have interpreted this part of your request as relating to Cabinet committees chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. I confirm that the Cabinet Office holds the information you have requested. However, the information is being withheld as it falls under the exemptions in Section 35(1) (a) and (b) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Section 35(1)(a) deals with the formulation or development of government policy and 35(1)(b) deals with Ministerial communications, including proceedings of any committee of the Cabinet.

In applying these exemptions we have had to consider the public interest in maintaining the exemptions against the public interest in disclosing the information. We recognise that the decisions Ministers make have a significant impact on the lives of citizens and there is a public interest in this process being transparent. We acknowledge that there could also be a public interest in more information being available about the role that particular Ministers have played in this process. In addition, we recognise that as



knowledge of the way Government works increases, the public contribution to the policy making process could become more effective.

However, we have concluded that the public interest in maintaining the exemptions outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information. If Ministers and officials suspected that once a decision was reached, information pertaining to the process by which they had reached that point was to be released (such as the timing and sequencing of meetings), they might be less willing to engage in full and frank discussions of the available options. This in turn would jeopardise the ability of Ministers to take decisions based on full advice and thorough consideration, which would undermine the quality of policy making. We consider that disclosure of the information you requested would erode the space within which policy is developed, including the convention of Ministerial collective responsibility for government policy. The exemption at section 35(1)(b) is designed to protect this convention.

If information concerning the number, frequency and pattern of Cabinet committee meetings on a particular subject over a particular period was to be released, those party to this information would be likely to draw inferences – rightly or wrongly – about the circumstances in which particular policies were developed. For example, they might draw such inferences if there happened to be a large number of meetings on a particular subject within a short period. If Ministers and officials suspected that this information would be released at a later date, they would be less likely to make use of the Cabinet committee system, and this would significantly undermine its effectiveness. We consider that there is a very strong public interest in maintaining the effectiveness of the Cabinet committee system, as it is essential for the effective operation of government and the maintenance of the doctrine of collective responsibility.

Under the Act we are obliged to provide advice and assistance. You may wish to refer to the information on the composition, chairmanship and terms of reference of the Ministerial Committees of the Cabinet that is available on our website: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/secretariats/committees/index.asp>. If you are seeking information about the development of specific policies or decisions, then you could identify those issues and place specific requests with the relevant departments.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are unhappy with the decisions made in relation to your request from the Cabinet Office you may ask for an internal review. If you wish to complain you should contact:

Howell James
Permanent Secretary
Government Communications
70 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AS



If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely

Alec Taylor.

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