

Duncan Campbell
and Christopher Hird

Tories miss crucial D Notice evidence

THREE OF THE FIVE Tory members of the Defence Committee who voted to keep the D Notice system did not attend the hearings at which witnesses critical of the system gave evidence. Sir John Langford-Holt, the chairman, Sir Frederic Bennett and Sir Timothy Kitson were present at the meetings which planned the inquiry and which considered the draft report; other than this the only meeting which they attended was that which heard evidence from Sir Frank Cooper, MoD permanent Under-Secretary and chairman of the Defence Press and Broadcasting Committee, which runs the D Notice system. (The attendance record of all members of the

committee is shown in the table below).

This may explain a rather curious feature: the Defence committee's conclusion does not tally with the gist of its report. Paragraph 24 of the report says: 'It is clear that the system as at present constituted is failing to fulfil the role for which it was created . . . as it stands the system hardly serves a useful purpose.' The D Notice Committee itself has plans for its own reform — and the Defence Committee's report says of these:

We cannot accept that the existing D Notice Committee should have the last word on this matter; the prescription for the future may be too radical for the Committee itself to contemplate.

Yet when it came to vote on Tuesday 5 August the committee had two possible conclusions to choose from. One suggested the abolition of the D Notice Committee, leaving responsibility for the Notices with specific government departments. The second,

proposed by Cranley Onslow, wanted the committee kept, but recognised, like the first, that the real need was for a complete reform of the Official Secrets Act. On the vote the committee divided evenly, so the chairman had the casting vote — with which he supported the other four Tories who wanted to retain the D Notice Committee.

The *New Statesman* was entirely responsible for the Defence Committee's decision to investigate the D Notice system. We argued (*NS* 4 April 1980) that the system had fallen into disuse to such an extent that 'formal recognition should be given to the actual ending of the system, through to disbandment of the Committee in its present form.' We also pointed out that obeying D Notices provided no protection against prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. Whatever the formal conclusion of the Defence Committee's enquiry, the body of the report at least recognises these two important features of the present system.

Below Sir John
Langford Holt;
above right Sir
Frederick Ben-
nett; below right
Sir Timothy Kit-
son.



Date of meeting and name of witness	Decide on enquiry 30 April	Committee deliberated 4 June	Frank Cooper 11 June	Windsor Clarke; Rear Admiral W. N. Ash 17 June	BBC; IBA; Granada 8 July	Chapman Pincher; Jonathan Aitken; The Guardian 15 July	New Statesman; Sunday Times; Washington Post 22 July	Committee deliberated 24 July	Committee deliberated 29 July	Consideration of draft report and vote on final report 30 July 5 August
Member of Committee										
Sir J Langford-Holt (C)	●	●	●							● ●
Sir F Bennett (C)	●		●							● ●
Sir T Kitson (C)	●		●							● ●
Patrick Wall (C)	●	●	●		●		●	●		● ●
Michael Mates (C)		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		● ●
Cranley Onslow (C)			●			●	●	●		● ●
Allen McKay (Lab)	●	●	●	●			●	●		● ●
John Gilbert (Lab)	●		●	●	●	●	●	●		● ●
John Cartwright (Lab)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		● ●
Bruce George (Lab)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		● ●
Bernard Conlan (Lab)	●	●	●							● ●

