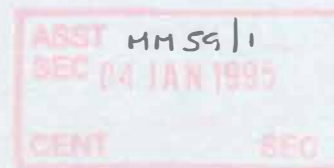
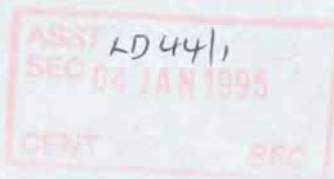


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FROM: D FELL
3 JANUARY 1995



cc PS/Sir John Wheeler (DFP,B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (DENI,B&L) - B
PS/Baroness Denton (DED,DANI&L) - B
PS/Mr Moss (DOE,DHSS&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
Mr Legge - B
Mr Thomas - B
NI Permanent Secretaries
Mr Whitlaw
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Kennedy
Mr Alexander
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr Maxwell - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Williams - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Brooker - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Campton
Mr Lindsay

Mrs Kenny (OPR)

Mr. Denton - LD 571

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L) - B

FIRE AT PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS: MONDAY 2 JANUARY 1995

1. I held a meeting this afternoon with appropriate colleagues to discuss yesterday's fire at Parliament Buildings. A full note of the meeting will be provided as soon as possible, but in the interim these are the main points which arose during the course of our discussion.

RUC Investigation

2. Preliminary indications from the RUC (who were represented at my meeting) suggest that the fire started close behind the

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Speaker's seat in the Debating Chamber. So far there is no reason to believe that the fire was started maliciously. The RUC is, however, continuing its investigations, and has undertaken to provide us with a full report.

Extent of Damage

3. The fire was remarkably well contained within the old Commons Chamber (whose outer structure is intact). However there was much smoke and water damage in the office block of the West Wing, which will therefore be out of commission for some considerable time. But essential services (electricity, heating and telephones) have been maintained in the Central and Eastern parts of the building.

Sprinkler System

4. Advice some time ago from DOE Works Service Engineers was that a sprinkler system would have been inappropriate in a building of the size and nature of Parliament Buildings. This advice was confirmed this morning by Works Service who consider it more appropriate in such a building to have an effective and rapid alarm system, and enhanced fire-fighting capacity.

Current Refurbishment Contract

5. It was in fact, ironically, central to the current refurbishment contract that a range of measures which seek to address fire precaution and firefighting measures within the building were being installed. They were, alas, not yet completed and active.

Decanted Staff

6. About one hundred and seventy staff (mainly DFP and DOE) have had to be decanted from Parliament Buildings in the immediate aftermath of the fire. Early indications are that it should be

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possible to have these staff re-established in Parliament Buildings probably within a week.

Meetings of XD and LXD

7. The rooms used to date for XD and LXD will not be available for some time. However we have identified alternative rooms in the South East, and if necessary South West corners of the ground floor of Parliament Buildings, which can be made ready for the XD and LXD meetings scheduled for 12 and 16 January.

Longer Term Use of the Building

8. We will be coming forward with separate advice on the longer term use of Parliament Buildings. Our immediate view is that the Commons Chamber should be re-built in some form, and that there might indeed be an opportunity to involve the local political parties in the design of any new Chamber.

Independent Enquiry

9. The strong advice of officials is that we have little to lose, and quite a lot to gain, if the Secretary of State were to commission an independent enquiry into the circumstances of the fire. Irrespective of whether the fire proves to have been started maliciously or not, we still see considerable advantage in having an independent assessment of the fire precaution and firefighting systems in Parliament Buildings. While officials are confident of the quality of the advice offered by DOE Engineers, to rely exclusively on this advice is likely to risk accusations of "whitewash" and we may in any event have something to learn from independent experts. Among those who might be invited to undertake the enquiry are a Chief Officer of a GB Fire Authority, the Home Office Fire Inspectorate; or one of several good firms of consulting engineers. DOE colleagues will come forward in the course of tomorrow with advice on names

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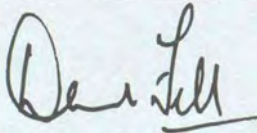
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to lead such an enquiry. This is the main point for decision, and my advice is that if we aim to go down this route, we should decide to do so quickly, and announce the decision. The Secretary of State may wish to have a word tomorrow morning about this on the VCR.

Press Line

10. Mr Wood advises that Ministers should make no further statement about the fire until the Secretary of State has indicated whether he is content to launch an independent enquiry.



DAVID FELL

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