



From the Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
HM Treasury
Treasury Chambers
Parliament Street
London
SW1P 3AG

27 May 1982

Dear Geoffrey,

Now that MISC 14 has endorsed the conclusions of the Report on Standards in International Trade of the ad hoc group of officials, which followed up our conclusions on MISC 14(81)10, I propose to proceed as outlined in my letter of 14 May to Patrick Jenkin. The official Standing Committee on Standards and Quality Assurance has now held its first meeting, and agreed that its terms of reference should be "to co-ordinate policy on standards and quality assurance, with a view to promoting the quality and international competitiveness of British goods". It was also agreed that outside bodies, including the BSI and the CBI, would need to be consulted as soon as this was appropriate.

The next step will be a Parliamentary announcement. I intend to make this in reply to a Written Question as soon as the House of Lords returns from the Spring holiday. The Question and Answer would also be repeated in the Commons on 8 June.



From the Secretary of State

I attach a draft of my proposed Answer which I understand has already been agreed by officials on the Inter-Departmental Committee. Unless I receive objections by 4 June, I shall give the Answer as drafted.

Copies of this letter go to the Prime Minister, other members of MISC 14, Willie Whitelaw, Francis Pym, James Prior, John Nott, Peter Walker, George Younger, Nicholas Edwards, David Howell, Norman Fowler and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

John, Arthur

LORD COCKFIELD

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DRAFT STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRADE

QUESTION

To ask Her Majesty's Government what policy they propose to raise the status of standards in the United Kingdom in order to strengthen the competitiveness of UK products both at home and in world markets?

ANSWER

1 Her Majesty's Government is convinced that standards supported by quality assurance, have a central role to play in the international competitiveness of British industry. Good standards that reflect the requirements of the international market place encourage the application of sound technologies. They help firms to achieve the levels of quality reliability and safety in design and manufacture which increasingly are a pre-requisite of successful competition in world markets. By eliminating unnecessary variety, they can reduce manufacturing cost and increase productivity, keeping our prices keen.

2 A strong standards system does not emerge of its own accord. Nor is it just a matter of creating the right institutional and legal framework. Principally, it is now a question of attitudes. Manufacturers and users in the public and private sectors and those who use standards for regulatory purposes in central and local government must each give their full support to the system. The Government, for its part, is committed to enhancing the status of standards in the UK and is therefore developing proposals to this end. I will publish these shortly in a consultative document.

3 A central feature of the Government's proposals will be an agreement with the British Standards Institution (BSI), as the national standards-making body. BSI would be asked to review through its Committees the corpus of national standards to verify that these are appropriate for use in legislation, public



procurement and overseas trade. The Government for its part would pursue two major objectives. First, to make much wider use of standards and independent certification and approval in its regulatory functions. This does not mean an extension of areas covered by mandatory standards but that those who comply with standards should have greater certainty of where they stand, especially in the matter of legal proceedings. Second, to rely more on standards and independent certification and approval in its procurement activities. Some Government departments are already moving in this direction. Among other questions to be considered will be the feasibility of a scheme for giving official recognition to certification and approval bodies, possibly backed up by a new national mark.

4 The Government will also be asking other public regulatory and purchasing authorities, the nationalised industries and the public corporations, to help to promote wider industrial efficiency by relating their requirements to standards. They will also be asked to consider whether more of their standards requirements could not be met within the national standards-making process, thus contributing to a stronger body of national standards.

5 The status of standards in the UK reflects and is reflected in the participants in the standards-making process. Users, whose views are of particular importance, tend to be under-represented.

As a consequence of the greater weight it intends to give to standards, the Government has reorganised its own machinery for dealing with standards-related issues and will be strengthening its contribution to the BSI committees responsible for writing standards. The consultative document will seek a commensurate response from other participants, reflecting their own intention to use the standards concerned. I am confident that BSI is managed and organised in such a way as to be well able to nurture the new approach.



6 The Government believes that a strong national standards policy will enhance the reputation for quality of British goods and thereby support the efforts of British industry in world markets. The forthcoming consultative document will propose means of achieving this end. The Government hopes that it will command the widespread support in all sectors of the economy which will ensure its success.

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