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## Letter to the Editor

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I see that Judith Hart has been at it again, this time in the last issue of the *IDS Bulletin* and in *Socialist Commentary*.

At what? At the thesis that civil servants, concerned only with simple economic and trading issues, and without regard to vital political factors, more or less determine our policies at international conferences dealing with development and that the UK position is only rescued from disaster by the last minute intervention of Ministers.

I would not dispute her proposition that the present system can be improved—most systems can. But the efficacy of the cure will largely depend on the accuracy of the diagnosis. Here Judith Hart has gone sadly astray unless, which I very much doubt, things have changed radically since my day.

The normal pattern is that the draft instructions for the delegation to a conference are prepared by officials of the Department concerned and then submitted, for amendment or approval, to Ministers. They may be submitted to Ministers either individually, or collectively at a committee meeting of the kind now advocated by Mrs. Hart. The text of the speech to be made by the Minister at the opening of the conference sometimes accompanies the draft instructions.

These instructions are then binding on officials and Ministers alike. The crunch in any conference comes in the last few days and it is then that a Minister normally rejoins the delegation, takes the political and negotiating temperature of the meeting and if necessary asks his colleagues for modifications in his instructions. Given the pressure of time, this process often tends to be a bit disorderly. But throughout it is Ministers who determine the policies, not officials. Officials will have had their say in the formulation of the policies but, once Ministers have determined them, officials are well trained to operate within them.

Judith Hart's view of the normal pattern is different, but I was surprised to read that, according to her, that pattern is disturbed only in two situations, one of which "is when a departmental Minister decides to exercise his responsibility for

policy decisions in his own field". Surely that is precisely what Ministers are for and this surely should be the norm not the exception. She goes on to say that "his later efforts will be spent on time consuming involvement in the line to be taken by his own officials at the inter-departmental meetings, and perhaps in arguing the toss with his colleagues when the officials' meetings have not accepted his view". Again, that is what Ministers are for—to settle policies in consultation with their officials and then to secure the acquiescence of their Ministerial colleagues in those policies.

Strong Ministers who know their own minds—and I number Judith Hart high among these—overcome the inevitable obstacles and secure, and acknowledge, the full support of their officials. That is why I am saddened by her suggestion that, but for the power of the bureaucrats, all would be well. Even if she was right about the bureaucrats, it isn't as simple as that and I suspect that Mrs. Hart had at least as many problems with her Ministerial colleagues as she did with her own officials.

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