Letter

Let Cabinet ministers talk themselves to a standstill

From Paul W Green, London, UK

Denis Healy (l) and James Callaghan: an object lesson for all prime ministers © Getty

MARCH 6, 2018

Sir, The last time that a British political party faced an economic decision anywhere near as momentous as that on Brexit was in 1976. The Labour government was fundamentally and dogmatically split between those who wanted to go down the route of import controls and continued fiscal deficits, and those who wanted to avoid a siege economy, take fiscal measures and seek the back-up available through the International Monetary Fund. The striking difference from current circumstances — where only now, a year and a half after the referendum, has the cabinet started to get to grips with the practical choices about what is possible — is that in 1976 James Callaghan held a long series of full cabinet meetings, maybe nine in all, in which the competing arguments were confronted.

In his own account of events Denis Healey praised the "consummate skill" with which Callaghan handled the cabinet as "an object lesson for all prime ministers. His technique was to allow his colleagues to talk themselves to a standstill in a long series of meetings." Ministers had to wear themselves out before accepting there was no alternative. The prize was that all the arguments were fully aired.

The party in the end held together because all the protagonists had been forced to confront what the alternatives involved in practice and could no longer hold to prejudices which they had no alternative but to recognise did not stand up to the cool light of reality.

The stakes are higher for the country now than they were then. Theresa May should allow an unrestricted debate in full cabinet about what the real issues are and let it run for as long as it takes.

David W Green

David Green Consulting,

London NW3, UK

Personal Assistant to the IMF Managing Director, 1974-77

Latest Letter

David W Green

David Green Consulting,

London NW3, UK

Personal Assistant to the IMF Managing Director, 1974-77