

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE PRESS

The Minister of Health (Mr. Ernest Brown) has written to all local authorities in England and Wales on the subject of the recent decision of the Court of Appeal in the case of De Buse and Others v. McCarty and Stepney Borough Council. Representations have been made to the Minister as to the possible effect of that decision on the practice of local authorities in supplying the Press with information (including committee reports) in advance of council meetings.

"The Minister is aware", states the circular, "that in the light of the decision, some local authorities have felt doubts as to the continuance of their normal practice in this matter.

"He is confident, however, that local authorities will appreciate the desirability, on the broadest grounds, of avoiding any withdrawal or restriction of facilities hitherto afforded to the Press, except in cases where this is necessary under present conditions for reasons of national security.

"Subject to this and to proper precautions against the publication of potentially defamatory matter, the Minister trusts that local authorities will be willing to continue their former practice.

"Representations were also made that arrangements in force in some areas for facilitating business under present conditions by delegation to an Emergency Committee operate to limit the publicity given to proceedings which, in the interests of local government, they should receive.

"The Minister fully recognizes that, on grounds of national security and for the sake of expedition, such arrangements may in some cases be necessary in present circumstances for transaction of part of the Council's business.

"Where, however, these considerations do not apply, it appears to the Minister that matters of public interest in the sphere of ordinary local government should as far as possible continue to be debated in open session of the Council; and further that, where for administrative convenience matters of that kind are finally dealt with by the Emergency Committee, the question of admitting the Press to the Committee's proceedings demands careful consideration".