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Reference Code:	2021/45/121
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Confidential

Assistant Secretary Gallagher (on return),

British Army views on the future of the UDR

I had a conversation with a journalist before leaving London this week which may be of interest.

Robert Fox is the Defence Editor of the Daily Telegraph. He has exceptionally good contacts in senior British Army circles and is regarded as the leading military expert within British journalism.

? (Fox told me on Wednesday that there is a move afoot at a very senior level in the British Army to "do something about the UDR". Citing conversations he had earlier this week, he believes that serious consideration is being given to disbanding the UDR. He has heard that a hint to this effect may be given in a speech to be delivered by Peter Brooke or one of his Ministers in NI over the coming weekend. He also understands that the British Government is considering mentioning the matter to the Irish side at the Conference meeting scheduled for 16 July.

While a number of senior Army figures have been unhappy for some time past with the UDR, they have refrained so far from proposing its disbandment as they judged that, as long as Mrs. Thatcher was in office, there would be no political will to take this step. Two important developments, however, have now placed the matter on the agenda.

First, there is the extensive review of defence policy and expenditure ("options for change") which has been undertaken in the light of the changed situation in Eastern Europe. There is a growing acceptance in Whitehall and in Army circles that Britain needs both to trim its military resources and to introduce

greater flexibility in the deployment of its resources. The Gulf crisis has taught the lesson that flexibility must be given priority in planning Britain's future defence requirements. Questions are now being asked about regiments with purely local functions which cannot be deployed elsewhere. Many find it unacceptable that there should be a regiment of the size of the UDR which cannot be deployed outside NI. In the same way, questions are being asked about the Gurkha Regiment, whose role is also circumscribed (though the initial advice, Fox understands, is that the Gurkhas should not be disbanded until after the Hong Kong issue has been resolved).

Second, the arrival of John Major in Downing Street has reportedly introduced a new open-mindedness at political level in relation to the UDR. Fox's understanding is that the possible disbandment of the UDR has received preliminary and very tentative consideration in Whitehall (in the MOD, NIO, FCO, Home Office and Treasury). It has also been floated in the Cabinet Office and the word back is that the Prime Minister has no difficulty in principle with the idea.

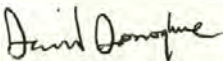
It is fully recognised by Fox's Army contacts that a proposal to disband the UDR would meet with the stiffest resistance from Unionist politicians. The Army view, however, is that "Orange sensibilities" cannot be allowed to stand in the way of reforms which are in the overall British interest.

The UDR is regarded as a serious liability in both practical and political terms. While there is respect for the professionalism and courage shown by many within the UDR, there is also a widespread view that the Regiment as a whole has not worked out in the manner envisaged by Lord Hunt. It is widely perceived as a sectarian Loyalist force. Its almost complete inability to attract Catholic recruits is a serious and continuing

embarrassment. The part-timers, in particular, are a very dubious asset (in both political and military terms) and have tarnished the reputation of the Army as a whole. It is believed that the UDR's role could be transferred without too much difficulty to an expanded RUC. The full-time members could be encouraged to join one of the Army's "Irish regiments" (e.g. the Royal Irish Rangers) or the Territorial Army and the part-timers would be phased out completely.

In political terms, both the Government and the Army would welcome an end to the criticism regularly directed at them by the Irish Government and others because of the misconduct of UDR members.

There is of course an full appreciation of the political cost which may have to be paid for taking this step. The intention, as Fox understands it, is that the possible disbandment of the UDR would be presented as an initiative taken by Tom King in the context of the overall defence review which he is currently conducting. In blunt terms, the hope would be that the fall-out (in terms of Unionist hostility) would be directed at King rather than Brooke, who clearly does not need an angry confrontation with Unionist leaders at this stage.



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28 June 1991