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*Mr Shannon*

*You will also need to see. 2 17/8*

FROM: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE  
17 AUGUST 1989

cc

PS/SofS (B&L) - B  
PS/MofS (B&L) o/r  
PS/Dr Mawhinney (B&L) - B  
PS/PUS (B&L) - B  
PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B  
Mr Burns o/r  
Mr Stephens - B  
Mr Miles - B  
Mr A Wilson - B  
Mr Wood (B&L) - B  
Mr Bell - B  
Mr Daniell - B



NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH THE CHIEF CONSTABLE: 14 AUGUST 1989

1. The Secretary of State met the Chief Constable on the evening of 14 August to discuss the security situation in the context of the Twentieth Anniversary, and our general public relations posture. A number of ephemeral topics were discussed; this note covers the more substantive points which should be recorded.

2. The Chief Constable said that on all the indicators to date the internment anniversary commemorations had been less violent this year than in 1988, which was encouraging since Sinn Fein would clearly like to create as much trouble as possible (although, of course, the Anniversary period could not yet be regarded as concluded). His own appearance at the 13 August Falls Road parade had been widely covered in the press with varying degrees of accuracy: it was not, for example true that he had sought out Alex Maskey to urge that discipline be maintained during the parade, and he had issued a message to all members of the RUC that morning to clarify this point. He had however commented that the parade had been well marshalled, since this was quite true and he had made similar comments about the Apprentice Boys' march in Londonderry on 12 August. He had experienced no particular hostility to himself on the Falls Road from the population at large (as distinct from Sinn Fein activists) and he had been struck by the tired and dispirited quality of the speeches made during the march from the platform (apart from Gerry Adams, who was always an effective speaker). As soon as the rain started the audience left for home and the parade was unceremoniously abandoned.

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3. In respect of the death of Seamus Duffy in the early hours of 9 August, he had spoken on that morning to the Chief Inspector and Inspector who were on the scene and was personally satisfied that the police had acted justifiably. Some video film was available, shot by the Army from Girdwood Barracks, which appeared to show Duffy and others throwing petrol bombs at the police: this was currently being enlarged in GB to enable a positive identification to be made. He believed that arranging for a senior RUC officer to investigate the incident, and inviting the Complaints Commission to supervise that investigation, struck the right balance in ensuring that the public interest was met. It was notable that Duffy's death, deeply regrettable as it was, had not aroused any lasting public reaction (which would probably not have been the case even two or three years ago).

4. The Secretary of State said that the Duffy episode had been instructive for him in that it had made clear the importance of having rapid and reliable information about an incident so as to enable him or his colleagues to react quickly to the intense and impromptu media pressure which arose very rapidly in Northern Ireland. He had no criticism of what had been done in this case, but he would be interested in the Chief Constable's general view of our public relations posture and performance. The police of course occupied a central and difficult position in this process, since the Chief Constable had an independent authority to the law for the proper conduct of any investigation, while at the same time it was the police who were the first people to be in possession of the facts about an incident.

5. The Chief Constable said that the police were indeed in a difficult position. On the Duffy case, he had ensured that the NIO were informed as soon as possible of all the facts of the incident as they were known at the time, and he had then established the internal investigation and brought in the Complaints Commission. From that point the RUC were caught in the sub judice rule. There had been a number of irresponsible instant reactions from people who could not have been in possession of the facts, and it was tempting

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for the police to issue their own rapid statement to counter-balance these. However he could not allow this, since it would put police credibility seriously at risk. He was in fact reasonably satisfied that in the Duffy case the police had acted perfectly properly, but this would not be formally confirmed until the investigations were completed. For the RUC to have rushed out a statement robustly defending their position before the facts were fully clear - and when it was still possible that the RUC might be shown to have been at fault - would have put police credibility seriously at risk and would have been a major error. However, in the Chief Constable's view the NIO was in a position to make general statements in reaction to particular incidents - for example, stressing the need for parental control and the desirability of not celebrating controversial anniversaries, rather on the lines of Bishop Daly's courageous comments. He would therefore always ensure that the NIO was apprised as early as possible of all the details known to the RUC about controversial incidents. In particularly difficult cases, he would ask to brief the Secretary of State himself.

6. The Secretary of State said that he recognised there were no easy answers. His concern was to ensure that information officers should work together closely to do as much as was possible in each particular case. Inaction on the information front could give advantage to propagandists for terrorism, who would of course be seeking to attack the RUC's position. The Chief Constable said that this was an area in which we would never get a totally satisfactory outcome. However, he believed that on balance our public relations effort was pretty effective and had led to increasingly perceptive and fair media coverage. It was possible to overdo the presentation of the Government's and Security Forces' case and cause a counter-productive reaction in the media. He appreciated that the GOC was concerned to see a much more immediate information reaction to controversial security incidents. Sometimes this might be the right course, but at other times it wasn't: blanket prescriptions were not possible in this area. At the same time, he was not sure that our current information handling arrangements could not be

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improved and he had some sympathy with the view that an NIO official with journalistic experience - preferably not a high-ranking official with many other responsibilities like Mr Miles - might be charged exclusively with liaising with the press over controversial incidents and feeding angles to them. This might profitably be looked at again in one of the committees subordinate to SPM. The Secretary of State thanked the Chief Constable for this interesting exposition of his views.

7. Three minor points which arose at the meeting should also be recorded:-

- (i) The Secretary of State asked how the Chief Constable would have handled the aftermath of an incident in which a man known to be a terrorist - but perhaps never convicted - was killed in a clash with the Security Forces. The Chief Constable said that on the information side, it would still probably be easier for the NIO rather than the RUC to issue an appropriate statement and give background briefing. In respect of the investigation into the circumstances, he would probably go for an investigating officer from another force, rather than the RUC, in such an incident.
- (ii) The Chief Constable said that the final version of the book prepared by Dr Mawhinney struck him as a very valuable contribution to the information effort.
- (iii) The Chief Constable mentioned that the best working-level information officer he knew was a Mr Bob Cox, a middle-ranking member of the Scotland Yard Information Department.

Signed

S J LEACH  
Private Secretary

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