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FROM: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE
11 AUGUST 1989



cc. PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/Minister of State (L&B) o/r
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) o/r 16/8
① PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr Burns o/r
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Miles - B
Mr A Wilson - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Wood (L&B) - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr J McConnell - B
Mr Blackwell - B

② N108

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

DISCUSSION ON INFORMATION POLICY AND STRUCTURES: 10 AUGUST 1989

The Secretary of State yesterday discussed with Dr Mawhinney, Sir K Bloomfield, Mr Stephens, Mr Wilson, Mr Miles, Mr Wood and Mr J McConnell the criticism of our information policy and PR response to security incidents made by the GOC. The Secretary of State said that while he had reached no view on the GOC's specific points, it was clearly hard to quarrel with his avowed intention ie. to give HMG the presentational edge in a situation where information and perceptions were clearly very important. The GOC had particularly mentioned to him the PR response to the Drumnakilly incident, although he was not acquainted with the details in this case.

2. Mr Miles said that the dissatisfaction expressed by the GOC (and MOD) about our information strategy went back a long way and raised genuine issues of principle. The GOC wanted a high-profile and interventionist body, headed by a Director of Information with considerable freedom of action, which would take a proactive and aggressive line in putting over the Government and security forces'

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case. In response we had established, in the Information Strategy Group (ISG), a less elaborate and institutionalised forum in which the information professionals from the RUC, the Army and the NIO met regularly under his chairmanship to liaise on information matters and coordinate their strategy on particular issues (ISG had, for example, proved extremely useful in achieving an effective and consistent response to the Twentieth Anniversary). It was hard to see how the GOC's more ambitious demands could be satisfied given that the RUC would not consent to place their own information structure under the control of an independent director rather than the Chief Constable. The police argued that they were responsible to the law, not to the Secretary of State, and pointed to the particular difficulties posed by the sub judice rule, which constrained their information response to particular incidents. Mr Stephens commented that the tension between the Army - who were always looking for a more affirmative PR line - and officials, who were concerned to safeguard Ministerial interests, was not confined to the NIO: it was a phenomenon which was also often encountered in MOD.

3. Sir K Bloomfield said that pressure for a more proactive information policy could lead to a blurring of the delicate but important line between information and propaganda. While others could rush into print with statements about controversial incidents, often on the basis of inadequate information, the Government could not afford to take an irresponsible line. If we gave out partial or slanted information, it would be held against us and our credibility would suffer for the future; politicians and others who had no actual responsibility for governing the Province or getting their facts right could be a lot less scrupulous in what they said. The NIO could not get into the business of trading biased statements with, say, Gerry Adams. But having said that, there might be scope to persuade the RUC to take a somewhat less cautious line on information without in any way compromising their position. At the moment, the police often refused to make a definitive statement about an incident until all the formal processes of investigation, consideration by the DPP etc had taken place. This involved a very

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extended timescale which was far too slow for effective information purposes. But there was presumably a point in the immediate aftermath of an incident when the police were reasonably sure of what had happened and would be in a position to offer some discreet background briefing. This would of course never be as quick as the instantaneous reaction of local politicians and others, but it might at least offer some way of getting the realities into the open before an unhelpful version of events became permanently established in the public mind. Mr Stephens commented that the RUC seemed to stand at the ultra-pure end of the spectrum of British police forces in respect of offering background briefing to the media.

4. Mr Wood said that it was axiomatic that the Government Information Service should never distort the truth in order to gain short-term presentational advantage: this would never pay off in the long run. The RUC had to protect the integrity of their criminal investigation into incidents and the arrangements which the GOC wanted to institute therefore seemed scarcely practicable. Nonetheless, on some specific points he had some sympathy with the GOC's frustrations. At Drumnakilly, for example, the RUC had missed a trick by not allowing photographers up to the scene much earlier than they did, and also by refusing to confirm that the terrorists' weapons had been fired at the scene until the wider ballistic tests had been completed.

5. Dr Mawhinney said that Mr Wood had done a good job in sharpening up the information response to particular incidents. But nonetheless the GOC had pointed to a genuine problem, particularly in respect of the timescale of our response. While he did not go along with the proposal for a "media overlord", he did consider that some further steps needed to be taken.

6. In further discussion the following points were also made::

- (i) Sir K Bloomfield suggested that we might take the lead in highlighting important themes for the media: for example, punishment shootings and "mistakes" by the

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terrorists. Clearly the Government should not indulge in propaganda but there was no reason for us to be backward in pointing out to the press the real nature of terrorist activity.

- (ii) Dr Mawhinney suggested that we might also be quicker in bringing out aspects of terrorist attacks which would be particularly repugnant to the community - for example, where an attack on the Security Forces put nearby children severely at risk.

7. The Secretary of State said that he had found the discussion valuable and thought-provoking. There was clearly still work to be done in this area - and indeed (as Mr Stephens had said) it was unlikely that a completely satisfactory arrangement could ever be achieved. He would reflect on the next steps, and would speak to the Chief Constable to discuss in general terms the practices followed by the RUC in responding to security incidents. [NOTE: This meeting has now been arranged for 4.45pm on Monday 14 August]

(signed:)

S J LEACH
PRIVATE SECRETARY
11 AUGUST 1989

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