

c.c. PS/SECRETARY OF STATE } ①
 PS/JUNIOR MINISTERS } (L&B)
 PS/PUS }
 PS/MR KIDD }
 MR JANES }
 MR PRITCHARD }
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 MR PALMER MR INNES }
 MR FORD }
 MR BUXTON }
 MR SEAMAN }
 MR ROBERTS }
 MR WALKER/- action para.9 }
 MF }

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

LORD MELCHETT'S MEETING WITH THE GOC AND SENIOR ARMY OFFICERS

1. Lord Melchett had lunch with the GOC, the Commander, Land Forces, and other senior army officers, including those in charge of 39 Brigade operating out of central Belfast, at HQNI on 27 July.

SECURITY POLICY:

2. The GOC summarised the trend in the level of violence as generally satisfactory except for the steady level of security forces' casualties. He outlined his understanding of "the Northern Ireland situation".

3. Lord Melchett disagreed with the GOC's opinion that violence was endemic to life in Northern Ireland, arguing that in most of Northern Ireland life went on almost as normal and that in some areas of life people there were less disorderly than in Great Britain; for example, records of school attendance were generally better. The GOC had said that violence would continue whatever happened, but Lord Melchett said that all the historical evidence justified a more optimistic view, in that communities recovered after wars or periods of intense civil conflict with far greater resilience than was ever expected while the war or conflict was actually in progress.

4. The GOC (rather indirectly) advocated a tougher line against terrorism, including the return of some form of detention without trial. He said great rewards could be reaped if 20 prime suspects

could be locked up, and suggested that the minority population had dissociated themselves from support for the IRA to the extent that this could now be done without sparking off a violent reaction.

Lord Melchett strongly disagreed with this and said that the statistics showed a decline in violence since internment ended, and that the impact of its reintroduction, however anyone attempted to package it, ~~on~~ the Republican population, would be catastrophic. He stressed the importance of keeping international opinion - often liable to be simplistic and misguided - behind HMG, if only to suppress the flow of arms, finance and moral support from North America and the Republic.

5. The GOC suggested that HMG might make more of the gory side of violence in its public relations, to swing support behind a tougher line. Lord Melchett indicated the success of the low profile PR policy adopted, for example, during the UUAC stoppage, which had meant, distasteful though this was, playing down even cold-blooded murders to avoid giving the public the impression that the UUAC were scoring any successes. He fully appreciated and sympathised with the Army's frustration when this policy applied to the murder of soldiers, but argued that the policy was proving effective, and that, in fact, PR policy reflected the real decline in violence that the GOC had himself spelt out.

6. This part of the conversation was interspersed with assurances from the GOC that he fully supported both the ending of internment and the whole of the Government's current political and security policy.

BAN:

7. The Army officers welcomed the activities of the BAN Planning Team, because of the contacts between HMG and the local communities which had been established, and because of the community, youth and recreation facilities which would be provided. To a specific question as to whether a capital building programme of several million pounds would cause security problems, no objections at all were raised.

8. Indeed, they said that many soldiers who came to Belfast from the worst slums of England were appalled by what they saw: it reminded them of England in the 1950s and the hard areas had actually deteriorated since the Army arrived in 1968. They said it would help troops on the ground considerably if they knew the Government was taking positive action to combat the appalling social conditions.

9. The officers were particularly anxious to be kept informed about the Planning Team's activities. Action: Mr Walker please get in touch with Brian Scoltock*, Civil Adviser, HQNI Ext 2426, to discuss the possibility of a briefing meeting in September on the action underway in BAN.

CIVIL REPS:

10. During the discussions, more than one passing reference was made to the proposed changes in the role of Civil Reps (for whom Lord Melchett has Ministerial responsibility). Beyond assuring the officers that Ministers read the Civil Reps monthly reports very carefully indeed, and that their views were certainly listened to, Lord Melchett avoided being drawn into any discussion about their future, or about any new district representative service.

DERELICTS:

11. Finally, a forceful plea was made from 39 Brigade officers for a speedier response to requests for the clearing of derelict houses.

* Antony Elford is deputy.

Linda Wilkinson
 BILL SMITH
 PS/Lord Melchett

August 1977

SECRET