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CONFIDENTIAL

13th April 1970

Dear Secretary

I made a courtesy call on Friday last on Mr Healey, Minister for Defence.

We talked first of all about the results of the county elections, and Mr Healey expressed himself as moderately happy with the outcome. He said that the borough elections which are to take place in about a month's time, will be a clearer guide as to how public opinion is moving. The best pointer to the results of the General Election will, however, be the public opinion polls, and Mr Healey expressed himself as reasonably confident that, by mid June, the margin between the two main Parties will be down to three or four per cent. If this happens, the Prime Minister might be strongly tempted to go for a June General Election, but Mr Healey himself, and many of his colleagues in the Cabinet think that this would be unwise. He said he would almost bet that the General Election will take place in October. It will be a tight contest, but he sees no reason why Labour should not succeed in pulling it off.

To delay the Election beyond October would be unwise, as the general economic atmosphere then is likely to be such as to cause a swing, indeed, maybe a sizeable swing, against the Government. Increasing costs and prices will begin to be felt in the late autumn, and there is bound to be a considerable amount of agitation for further wage increases.

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On the Northern Ireland situation, Mr Healey did not have much new to say. He expressed considerable sympathy for General Freeland, but readily admitted that, in the Government's view, the General had talked out of turn. There can be no question of reducing the military strength in the North while a serious threat to peace exists there. There are, at present, eight battalions in the Six Counties, but one of these is more or less supernumerary in that it was put in to cope with the possibility of an emergency, at a time when some of the military units in the North were being changed over.

Mr Healey said that he would be very happy to be able to pull some of the forces out of the North at this time, as there is a pressing need for them elsewhere. If an atmosphere of reasonable peace could be established in the area shortly, and if there was a reasonable assurance of fairly peaceful conditions in the future, then he might be able to reduce the strength in the North to five battalions in twelve months from now. That, however, may be too much to hope for, and decisions on the strength of the military presence have, of course, to be taken in the light of developments from day to day.

We talked briefly about the pending by-elections, and Mr Healey expressed the view that the election of Paisley to Stormont could not but be harmful. Membership of Stormont would give Paisley a platform for his extreme views and ^{rabble} rebel rousing, which he has not got at present, and as a result, one could see a considerable growth in support, at constituency level, for the Right-wing of the Unionist Party.

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Mr Healey talked too about his Irish ancestry, and claimed to have many relatives in County Mayo, and in areas around the Border. He said he receives lots of letters from them now, but that they all ignored his existence until he became a person of some importance in Government.

Yours sincerely

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