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SECRETARY OF STATE

File

John G. J.

MO 19/3S

PRIME MINISTER

NI(96)7: NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY AND ITS PRESENTATION

I have read with great interest the analysis and conclusions in NI(96)7. I strongly endorse the measures recommended but I have a number of concerns about the manner in which they need to be implemented if they are to be of enduring effectiveness.

2. I welcome especially the proposals to create a new senior group under Sir Robin Butler and to revamp the TIO. If the new group and a revitalised TIO are to have any significant impact, it is vital that they should meet regularly and adopt a proactive stance. Implementing the recommendations of NI(96)7 provides a golden opportunity to give them an active remit to identify and drive through measures to improve co-ordination and exploitation of all the capabilities which can be brought to bear on Irish terrorism.

3. If the new committees are to be more effective than their predecessors, they must be more than just an extra layer in the existing system. And they must have a substantive body of work to sustain regular meetings. I see it as essential for one of them to be given a clear remit which requires it to meet at least monthly in order to oversee and lend impetus to operational as well as policy developments. In order to discharge an operational oversight function, the committee must take a close continuing

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interest in the operational situation (receiving adequate briefing on current operations) and the machinery of operational management by the law and order agencies. My endorsement of NI(96)7 is, therefore, conditional upon a remit of that kind.

4. Although I think briefings should not exclude operations in Northern Ireland, I do not see a need for the group or committee to be briefed in detail on all the extensive work going on there. They do need to have an adequate understanding of those activities if they are to be able to take an informed overview of the counter-terrorist campaign but the details of Northern Ireland operations are already addressed regularly by the Security Policy Meeting and the Province Executive Committee machinery in Northern Ireland. MOD military and civilian staffs are directly involved in the latter and it is clear that this machinery has the right kind of remit and generally works well.

5. It occurs to me, however, that some of this Northern Ireland machinery might usefully serve as a role model in GB. Indeed, it seems right to look again to see whether there are other lessons learnt in Northern Ireland which could be exploited more fully to enhance the effectiveness of equivalent machinery and practices in GB. An early task for the Butler Group or the revamped TIO might be to commission detailed assessments of the scope for modifying operational management machinery in GB so as to replicate "best practice" in Northern Ireland. I understand that ACPO(TAM) and the Metropolitan Police have been reviewing GB practice recently - including ways to enhance the management of operations across constabulary boundaries, more effective equipment and training, and better use of available manpower. This is a most commendable initiative and they should be encouraged to consider the full spectrum of lessons which might be learnt from Northern Ireland. Whilst constitutional obstacles may make it difficult to apply Northern Ireland structures, procedures and practices to GB, we should take every opportunity to build further in GB towards the unitary approach which applies in Northern Ireland.

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6. The improved arrangements relating to information handling should add greatly to the effectiveness with which departments can contribute, and I am content with what is proposed.

7. I am sending copies of this minute to the other members of NI and to Sir Robin Butler.

Ministry of Defence

6 September 1996

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