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Prime Minister

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

I have already welcomed the proposals for developing NI policy and presentation set out in the Cabinet Office paper. Michael Portillo gave a more guarded welcome, conditional on giving one of the official committees an "operational oversight function".

2. I am not entirely clear what this would mean. If the proposal is that the police and the Security Service should update a senior official committee on the current threat and the measures being taken to meet it, then I agree. Indeed, it is difficult to see how a revitalised committee could carry out a useful function of co-ordinating and exploiting all the assets available without such information. I understand that this broadly reflects practice within the existing committee structure.

3. If Michael has in mind something more directive, then I would have grave reservations. Chief constables rightly guard their operational independence closely: it is not for any Minister, far less an official committee, to direct them on operational priorities or handling. And on current operations, neither the police nor the Security Service would be happy with detailed briefing on sensitive and sometimes lengthy operations. The wider the information travels, the greater the risk that the operation is inadvertently compromised.

4. For these reasons, I think a formal remit referring to operational oversight would be wrong and would confuse the lines of responsibility. But I would be perfectly happy with a remit which instructed the committee to carry out its functions in the light of the current threat assessment and the action being taken to counter it.

5. I am sending a copy of this minute to members of NI and to Sir Robin Butler.

A. H.

20th September 1996

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