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Confidential

*Mr. Swift
To see please
DJS*

7 May 1976

*cc. PSM
PSS
Mr. M. Cogan
DJS*

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Attention Anglo-Irish Division

The following, for information, are notes on a conversation earlier this week with John Bourn of the Northern Ireland Office on whom I called for a general discussion on current Northern Ireland developments.

On the political front Bourn had little to say that was illuminating. The Secretary of State is making it very clear that the Government is not contemplating any fresh initiatives at the present time. Direct rule is there for the period foreseeable ahead and it is a matter of seeing to it that the manner of conducting this stage is arranged in the most effective and acceptable way.

The Secretary of State feels that a large number of people in Northern Ireland, including many politicians, are happy enough to accept the present system for the time being and, indeed, somewhat relieved that fresh initiatives have been set aside for the moment. Bourn does not feel that the noises coming from various groups regarding active opposition to continue direct rule add up to much at the present time. However, they are well aware that the situation must be watched very closely and, in particular, of the need to avoid any specific issue being blown up to the extent where it can be used as a rallying point for disparate elements who have no ^{other} constructive common ground. The NIO was somewhat concerned that the recent defence cuts in Northern Ireland might be such an issue but this has not, in fact, proved to be the case. There is a certain shifting around and resettling process going on at the political level in the post-Convention period but, to date, they have seen no sign that this is leading to any clearly observable new alignments which offer constructive possibilities. The UUUC at

Westminster is settling in to a predictable line of acceptance of the present state of affairs. The NIO are not impressed by Mr Baird's challenges and, even less so, by Mr West's. Dr Paisley's comparative silence is deafening.

The next major item on the NIO's Westminster calendar will be in July with the renewal of the constitutional arrangements for direct rule and also the renewal of the Northern Ireland Emergency Provisions Act. Clearly, at that stage, the Government will have to explain further its attitude in the House on the course of affairs in Northern Ireland. Before then the NIO will be examining further the various matters in this context on which the Government can expect to be questioned including local government structures and the handling of Northern Ireland business at Westminster. If there were any adjustments to be made - and he had no indication to offer at this stage that there would be - they would be set firmly in the present direct rule framework and would be a matter of any modifications or additional measures which seem desirable to make the system work more efficiently and easily. In general, as things look at the moment, the Government's presentation in July would be one of continued direct rule which would avoid any new suggestion of permanence while at the same time avoiding such emphasis on the temporary character of direct rule as to lead to unwarranted speculation that fresh initiatives might be in the offing in the near future.

When the conversation turned to recent troop redeployments in the North, Mr Bourn emphasised that these had been carried out for practical reasons; they were not part of a coherent overall strategy to reduce Army strengths and they in no way were to be seen as indicative of a planned programme of troop withdrawals. The Secretary of State made this clear in his statement to the press of 4th May (attached). Bourn did agree that the replacement of troops by RMP was consistent with the NIO's desire gradually, as the security situation permitted, to enhance the police role and reduce that of the Army. The RMP

could be seen as a half way presence between the two forces and they thought it made sense to have their presence where this was thought feasible. He emphasised, however, that the RMP numbers were in any event limited. Already an undue proportion of RMP strength was stationed in Northern Ireland; and there were therefore definite limits to the extent to which the military police could take over the Army role even where circumstances permitted. Army units would be relocated only when they were fully satisfied that the Army presence in particular areas was not required.

I probed Bourn on the way in which the inter-Ministerial study on the primacy of the police is developing. It was of interest that Mr Rees in his statement of 4th May had declared that the study was not in any case designed to change the basic security policy of working through a civilian police force, the UDR and the Army. Among other queries I asked Bourn how he expected the study would be handled procedurally; to what extent it might recommend innovative measures which could be given immediate effect; how far it would attempt to outline a timetable for the progressive primacy of police operations in relation to those of the Army; and what kinds of methods the Committee was examining in its study of ways to enhance the civilian police role and locally recruited forces.

Bourn made it clear that he did not feel able to give me any substantive information at this stage on the progress of the study or its likely conclusions. He expected that it would be completed towards the end of this month or early next month. It was uncertain to what extent the findings of the study could be made public. He recognised, however, that there would obviously be considerable interest in it and it might be that, while not all of the study could be made public, a summary of the main conclusions reached by Ministers and the considerations which had led them to these conclusions would be published.

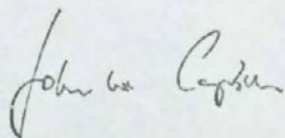
The study might attempt to sketch a timetable scenario on the stages through which primacy of the police could be asserted and their role enhanced in proportion to a gradual reduction of the military presence. Obviously, however, any such scenario would be purely notional in the sense that replacement of the Army by the police would depend at every stage on the development of the security situation. They were very much aware of the dangers that would result from any steps taken which could place the civilian police in a paramilitary role. The RUC furthermore was extremely conscious of this factor and would itself resist any such tendencies. On locally recruited forces the study would examine the range of possibilities and implications but obviously, in a situation such as that which prevails in Northern Ireland, a multiplicity of locally recruited forces with inevitable local recruitment with religious majorities of one or other domination, could create a situation of, at the least, quite unacceptable confusion.

They had a wide mandate to examine across the board the ways in which primacy of the civilian police could be enhanced. But here again he did not feel ^{able} ~~about~~ to indicate at this stage any particular measures which the study was likely to recommend.

Catholic recruitment to the RUC was still at unhappily low levels and there was no evidence of any significant improvement. He did mention that, on a recent visit to Belfast, the RUC had told him with some satisfaction that out of a recent intake of ten graduate personnel, three had been Catholics, ^{and} four had First Class Honours! Bourn emphasised that he fully understood the interest we had in the study and he would be recommending that before any substantive public statements were made on its findings we should be informed of its content and our views sought. There was a suggestion that the Secretary of State might visit Dublin towards the end of this month and the study might then be sufficiently advanced to provide the Secretary of State with a suitable occasion to discuss the study's findings with us. Alternatively at the appropriate time.

he could himself brief us more fully on the study either here, through the Embassy, or perhaps through his visiting Dublin.

I confirmed the interest we would have in having further information on the progress of the study as soon as this was feasible and said that I was sure that his suggestions on how this might be done would be welcomed in Dublin.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John W. Cooper".

Minister Plenipotentiary