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Primacy of the RUC

During the debate at Westminster on 12 January 1976 on the Northern Ireland Convention Report Mr. Rees made the following statement

... it is the policy of the Government to bring about a situation in which there can be a progressive reduction in the present commitment of the Army, both in numbers and in the scale of activity, when it has ceased to be involved in internal security. But this Depends upon the Royal Ulster Constabulary and civil policing playing an increasing role. Above all, it depends upon reduction in the scale of violence ... .

I wish to announce that, with ministerial colleagues from other Departments, I shall examine the action and resources required for the next few years to maintain law and order in Northern Ireland. This will include how best to achieve the primacy of the police, the size and the role of locally-recruited forces, and the progressive reduction of the Army as soon as is safely practicable. I shall be inviting the parties in the Convention to make their views known to me in writing ... .

At Westminster on 29 April Mr. Rees said that he had had a preliminary report from civil servants examining the issues but that he did not envisage that the report would be published.

During the month of April, there had been a wave of speculation in the press and in Northern political circles about the "withdrawal" of the British Army. This speculation would appear to have been based on troop redeployments within Northern Ireland, on the withdrawal of the "spearhead" battalion and on the announcement of improved equipment (self-loading rifles, armoured personnel carriers) for the RUC. On 25 April, the Sunday Times published an article by Chris Ryder called "Ulsterisation" and with the subtitle "Plans are speeded up for troops to hand over to police and UDR". Ryder referred to the proposed adoption by the RUC of a "high risk profile" and alleged that the Army strength would be reduced by half next autumn.



At the beginning of May, John Campbell of the Embassy in London discussed the primacy issue with John Bourn of the Northern Ireland Office, who chairs the group of officials studying the subject. Mr. Bourn emphasised that recent troop redeployments 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 had made this clear in a statement to the press of 4th May in which he said:

'The objective of security policy in Northern Ireland is and will remain to maintain law and order and to secure the conviction of criminals through the courts. The success of this emphasis on police work in recent weeks is shown by the encouraging figures for the number of people charged. In April alone one hundred and eleven persons were charged, including forty six for firearms offences, which is the highest monthly figure since November 1975. There is no doubt that the improving rate of detection is having its effect on criminality in Northern Ireland.

This continuing success has also permitted a routine redeployment of some police and army resources in Northern Ireland. As I said in the House of Commons last week, it is for the GOC to decide how to deploy his troops and it has never been my practice to make public statements on the details. However, I can now confirm in general terms that there is a greater involvement of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Royal Military Police in West Belfast. The Spearhead Battalion, which is not part of the normal force level, is leaving the Province, but the GOC has ensured by redeployment that there has been no change in force levels in and around the South Armagh area and the SAS remains there.

This overall redeployment does not arise from the study of the forces required to maintain law and order in Northern Ireland over the next few years. I announced this study in the House of Commons on 12 January 1976 and described it further in the House on 29 April 1976. I then said that my ministerial colleagues in other Departments and I were examining the action and resources required over the next few years to maintain law and order, how



best to achieve the primacy of the police, the size and role of locally recruited forces, and the progressive reduction of the armed forces as soon as is safely practical.

This examination is not yet complete. It is not in any case designed to change the basic security policy of working through a civilian police force, a locally-raised Ulster Defence Regiment, and the regular army's continuance in Northern Ireland as long as is necessary.

Bourn accepted that the replacement of troops by military police (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 and within the limited numbers available.

Mr. Campbell probed Bourn on the way in which the inter-Ministerial study on the primacy of the police was developing, noting that Mr. Rees in his statement of 4th May quoted above 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 he 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 any substantive information at that stage on the progress of the study or its likely conclusions. He expected that it would be completed towards the end of May or early June. 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.

The group 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 to indicate 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. By the time of the Secretary of State's current visit to Dublin the study might be sufficiently advanced to provide the Secretary of State with a suitable occasion to discuss the study's findings with Irish Ministers. Alternatively at the appropriate time, Bourn could himself brief us more fully on the study either in London, through the Embassy, or perhaps through his visiting Dublin.



Mr. Campbell 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 he was sure that his suggestions on how this might be done would be welcomed in Dublin.