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Airey Neave, Opposition Front Bench Spokesman on Northern Ireland

After a distinguished military service in the last war, during which he escaped from Colditz, Airey Neave was elected to parliament in 1951. A barrister by training, he held a succession of junior ministerial posts between 1954-'59 but, perhaps due to a severe heart complaint, he decided at that stage to pursue his career from the backbenches. In early 1975, he returned to prominence by masterminding Mrs Thatcher's campaign for the Tory leadership, for which he was duly awarded with the job of Shadow Spokesman on Northern Ireland and the key position of Head of her Private Office. Thatcher and Neave are close and trusting friends.

Mr Neave is generally held to be more than a little dull but, for all that, his books (relating to the last war) make interesting and lively reading. His poor reputation on Northern Ireland affairs undoubtedly stems from the fact that almost all his speeches on the subject have concentrated on the security issue. In some of these, in the past, Neave has hinted that the Tories, if returned to power, would consider the return of detention for the 100 or so "godfathers" who "masterminded crime and outrage". Recently, however, he has been more circumspect in his remarks and has hinted that in opposition one must of necessity take a tougher line than in government.

Neave's other bone of contention has been the Government's failure to establish some form of interim elected body in the North. He believes that it is up to the Government to take an initiative to this effect and (given in particular that there are eight separate political parties in the North) has described Mason's argument that the politicians themselves must reach agreement as "balderdash".

While it is not clear what precise terms of reference Neave's proposed Council would have, he did suggest in the course of a meeting with the former Foreign Minister on the 25th April last that it should have a function in the Westminster legislative process for Northern Ireland (about which the Tories are very unhappy at the moment) but at what stage he

found it difficult to say. It might, he thought, report to a Committee of the House which could be set up to deal with legislation for the Province.

To sum up therefore, Neave is a rather limited man with, as one would expect, an especially high regard for the security forces in Northern Ireland. At the same time, he has shown himself on occasion to be approachable and sympathetic and, most importantly, not unprepared to listen with a relatively open mind to a contrary point of view.

He was born in 1916.