

ISG(O), 8 MAY: PUBLIC PRESENTATION IN GREAT BRITAIN OF PIRA ACTIVITIES

1. There seem to be two main strands to this issue. One is the question of the Whitehall machines' and the Government's tactical handling of the PIRA campaign in Great Britain. Second, there is the question of what role GB public and media opinion has to play in our efforts to achieve political stability and defeat terrorism in Northern Ireland. The two strands are of course linked (see below).

Whitehall and the Official Machine

2. The unfortunate Carlton Club statement is of course the locus classicus. SIL's feeling is that the lessons of that incident have been well learnt. The statement was almost as counter-productive in terms of GB opinion as it was in Northern Ireland itself, as the response to it in Parliament and subsequent public comment demonstrate. At official level in the Home Office, the episode seems well taken to heart; we suspect (but have no proof) that the same is true in Mr Speaker's Office.

3. As regards the "NI training" of other parts of the Whitehall machine, we have confidence in the terrorism side of the Home Office (fostered by the NI backgrounds of many of the key personnel there). We can, of course, always rely on a sympathetic hearing from the Attorney-General's Office: although nothing is going to prevent the prosecution process from throwing nasties our way on a regular basis. FCO and Mr Hurd will not drop any clangers. The Prime Minister has visited Northern Ireland and we do not immediately see any way of increasing the level of NI awareness in that quarter. There would however be advantage (subject to the SofS' views) in encouraging the Home Secretary to

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take a closer personal interest in, and perhaps visit, Northern Ireland.

4. As regards the content of what is said in Great Britain, the tendency in recent years has been to take the NI situation "as read". Government statements have tended to focus upon the action which is in hand to prevent or forestall further terrorist attack, rather than the issues which underlie the terrorist campaign. In so far as this conveys the impression in Northern Ireland that GB regards PIRA terrorism as tiresome, exasperating, but something essentially external to GB which just has to be coped with, then that is no doubt galling. GB departments would no doubt welcome the ability to do more than announce another new security "review" in response to each incident. We could therefore easily say more about PIRA, its aims, objectives, and evils, in GB. But we are not sure that it is in our interest to encourage such a development. PIRA wants the GB terrorist campaign to produce both war-weariness and "awakening" to the justice of the Republican cause. At present, they do not seem to be succeeding in the first objective; it is not really in our interest to promote the second by stimulating discussion of the politics of terrorism. The flatness of GB Government announcements about terrorism seems to serve our objective, of transmitting to the terrorists a sense of the futility of their campaign, admirably. (Notwithstanding the Paymaster-General's doubts about "futility".)

5. What action should we be taking? Obviously we should try to encourage the relevant officials and Ministers to visit Northern Ireland wherever possible; there is no better way to develop a feel for NI sensitivities. We should, particularly, look for opportunities to get the Home Secretary to Northern Ireland, if we can; but it is not easy given his extremely limited responsibilities there. There is also a question as to whether we should try to associate the Home Office, in particular, more closely with some of our own information strategy work, for

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example by arranging for them to receive ISG papers and perhaps attend selected meetings. We could also easily step up our supply of paper for information from SIL to F4 Division (we send surprisingly little, and much less than to RID) although whether officials there would find time to read it all is another matter.

Wider Public Opinion

6. ISG(O) was concerned about the particular problem of the Daily Mirror's policy. We agree that if the Daily Mirror could be persuaded to change their approach, then that might have a worthwhile effect on PIRA perception of GB opinion, and so on PIRA's determination to continue the struggle. No-one in Whitehall will do this for us; we will have to do it ourselves, with such help as we can get from the Home Office or No. 10, and if we are to go down this road then it seems something that Information Services and Ministers between them must handle. We would, of course, have to assume that the public interest in achieving a change of front so heavily outweighed any political interest at stake that Civil Servants could properly be employed in this activity.

9. On the broader front, however, we need not be dissatisfied with the role which the great bulk of the GB media and GB public opinion play in support NI policies. For the most part, GB opinion constitutes an inert mass against which PIRA's strategy makers are welcome to beat their heads. Too zealous an explanation in GB of NI policies by the Government risks becoming a debate about those policies, in which can only give moral succour and hope to PIRA. Leaving aside the special case of the Daily Mirror, it seems prudent to leave well alone. ISG(O)'s views are however invited.

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