

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



CONFIDENTIAL

HOME OFFICE
QUEEN ANNE'S GATE
LONDON SW1H 9AT
09 DEC 1992

252/135/92

Dear Jenny,

TERRORIST INCIDENTS: MEDIA HANDLING BY MINISTERS

Following discussion with the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary has asked that the enclosed paper, on handling media interest in Irish Republican terrorism on the mainland, be circulated to all members of the Cabinet. The paper, the main points of which are summarised in the attached aide memoire, has been prepared by the Metropolitan Police after discussion with other Departments and agencies. The paper sets out some straightforward principles that should guide any response to terrorist incidents and should ensure that that response is appropriate and consistent.

The Home Secretary has commented that he is grateful to colleagues for the sensible way in which recent incidents have been handled. It is very important not to over-react and thereby present the terrorists with a propaganda victory. If a response is called for, the maintenance of public confidence and the characterisation of PIRA as criminals are of particular significance.

The Home Secretary would be grateful if colleagues would bring the main points of the police advice to the attention of other Ministers in their Departments.

I am copying this letter and enclosures to the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, Private Secretaries of other members of the Cabinet and to Melanie Leech (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely
Joan

MISS J MacNAUGHTON

Miss Jenny Rowe
Private Secretary
Lord Chancellor's Department
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW

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AIDE-MEMOIRE: POINTS TO REMEMBER IN HANDLING MEDIA COVERAGE OF PIRA INCIDENTS ON THE MAINLAND

- DO NOT OVER-REACT - Do not give an instant reaction or make a statement unnecessarily. This only helps the terrorists. It is important not to build events up or adopt a response inconsistent with what would be followed in similar circumstances in Northern Ireland;
- SEEK TO MAINTAIN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE - both in the actions of the police and others and in the effectiveness of public vigilance. The public must be encouraged to carry on life as normal;
- CHARACTERISE PIRA AS CRIMINALS - It is essential to avoid glamourising or dignifying PIRA and its criminal activities through inappropriate, paramilitary language and descriptions, such as "innocent victim" and "active service unit";
- MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONS WITH THE MEDIA - The best way to promote responsible co-operation on the part of the media is to be open and straightforward in dealing with them and in encouraging them not to respond inappropriately to incidents;
- DO NOT CRIMINALISE THE IRISH COMMUNITY - The public perception of PIRA's resources must be reinforced and the willingness of the Irish community to co-operate with the police maintained.

Home Office

1992



C O N F I D E N T I A L

METROPOLITAN POLICE SERVICE

IRISH REPUBLICAN TERRORISM ON MAINLAND GREAT BRITAIN:
THE MEDIA STRATEGY

Note by the Director of Public Affairs and Internal Communications,
Metropolitan Police Service

1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This paper describes the strategic approach of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) for dealing with media interest in Irish Republican terrorism in London. It also considers the arrangements under which relevant advice is offered to Chief Constables by the Commander of the Anti-Terrorist Branch (SO13) in this role as National Co-ordinator of investigations into the criminal acts of the terrorists.
- 1.2 The paper takes account of recent discussions in London between the Director of Public Affairs, MPS, and the Chief of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence; and in Belfast with the Director of Information, Northern Ireland Office, and the Chief Information Officer, Royal Ulster Constabulary. There was a strong consensus about the principal objectives and tactics; and agreement that the considerable difference between the situations in Northern Ireland and the mainland calls for particular variations in approach.
- 1.3 There is ample evidence of the continued effectiveness of the MPS strategy in London, and wherever else it is adopted on the mainland. However, securing a consistent approach by all police forces is an issue, and may call for further guidance. There is also a need for all agencies and parties concerned with the counter-terrorist effort and who have contact with opinion formers to convey the basic messages of the strategy.
- 1.4 It may be useful to set up a group comprising the relevant departmental directors of information to review and reinforce the effectiveness of the strategy across the UK.

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2. MPS OBJECTIVES

The MPS has several objectives within its strategy. These are described below with brief commentaries:

2.1 Public confidence must be maintained, both in the authorities, and in the effectiveness of public vigilance

2.1.1 Belief in the determination and ability of Government, the police and other agencies to combat terrorists must be upheld. At the same time, public expectations must be kept realistic; there must be no incredible statements about the ability of the authorities to stop bombing attacks. Indeed, the public must also be reminded that (for example) turning Westminster into an armed enclave as a result of terrorist acts would be a victory for the terrorists.

2.1.2 The exceptionally important role of the public in coming forward with information, and in maintaining vigilance against attacks, must be stressed wherever possible. A consistency of approach both in messages and in visual identity (posters and other material with a recognisable 'brand') has proven valuable, as has the Anti-Terrorist Hotline (telephone 0800 789321).

2.1.3 There have been marked results: recently, members of the public spotted and reported bombs on the track at Tottenham Underground Station, and under a car in the City; and the suspicions of shopkeepers led to the arrest of two men in connection with the murder of a special constable in Yorkshire. There are many other examples where public vigilance or curiosity has provided useful dividends.

2.2 The terrorists must be characterised consistently and firmly as murderous criminals

2.2.1 The terrorists' activities and organisational details must not be dignified in public with paramilitary terminology (eg 'active service unit'); nor should they be described in a way that implies grudging respect. It must never be forgotten that whatever expertise or political conviction they display, their acts are wicked and criminal.

2.2.2 This does not inhibit the raising of the issue, nor should it discourage others with a locus in the matter. A recent attack in London was described in at least one quality daily newspaper as 'audacious'. This was taken up with the journalists concerned, with mixed reactions; ready agreement and understanding, or great suspicion of a call for self-censorship.

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2.2.3 Some recent newspaper reports of remarks attributed to senior military personnel in Northern Ireland had a strong flavour of respect for a 'worthy foe'. It should be noted that all those consulted in preparation of this paper agreed on the undesirability of such remarks.

2.3 The ability of police to rely on voluntary news blackouts and similar appropriate agreements with the media is vital; their essential precursor - the credibility and integrity of police/media relations - must be preserved

2.3.1 Police forces in general, and the MPS in particular, have invested a great deal of goodwill in a system under which the media repeatedly agrees to embargo reports of crime, particularly kidnaps, where life is at stake. In exchange for extensive disclosure of the facts and post-hoc, pre-charge facilities, journalists guarantee no publication, or approaches to families or others, until arrests have been made.

2.3.2 The MPS, acting on behalf of ACPO, and (occasionally) other individual forces, have successfully extended the arrangements to Operations such as Octavian and Neon, where police outlined to senior editorial executives the tasks being undertaken. Any form of public discussion would have undermined those operations, but they were so extensive that only such an agreement could protect them from inadvertent disclosure.

2.3.3 Similarly, the MPS successfully co-ordinated what was probably the most complex, voluntary news blackout ever seen in this country to protect a police counter terrorist operation in connection with a PIRA arms cache found on the Welsh coast.

2.3.4 There should be no illusion that these agreements are automatic or easy. The media, collectively and individually, repeatedly make the following points:-

- they are continually concerned about the possibility of their good faith being taken for granted and abused;

- they are concerned for their own credibility;

they stress that they should never be put at risk of comprising an operation or endangering life for lack of information or guidance;

- they would have little confidence in arrangements concerning terrorism unless the MPS was involved. (They see this as essential because of the MPS's experience, expertise and credibility.)

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2.3.5 The Met's reputation among journalists for honesty and openness is guarded most carefully. Short-term gain by obstruction or half-truths is not an option. However, we obviously do not offer up all facts to the media. The test applied is that every statement would still be seen to be true if subsequently every available fact was laid bare.

2.3.6 This ability to make a range of speedy and effective voluntary arrangements is probably unique and it is built on consistent hard work. This starts at the scenes of outrages and is continued during consequent events. The keys are:

- ready availability for guidance when stories and rumours are bubbling;
- and semi-routine background briefing.

The focus is upon Commander SO13, although more senior officers handle the formalities of a blackout.

2.4 The Irish community must not be criminalised

2.4.1 There are very good reasons why this objective must be met, for political, criminological and public order reasons. A further reason is to reinforce the public's perception that the terrorists have only limited resources available, and therefore public vigilance is worthwhile.

2.5 The terrorists must not be given a propaganda victory through overreaction by police or Government

2.5.1 This is an increasingly difficult area. Overreaction by police forces, and by some public figures is seized upon by the media and a disproportionate impact is achieved by terrorists at little risk to themselves.

2.5.2 For example an accidental find of discarded terrorists material can be unwittingly elevated to a real threat. A successful, but low level attack, can be inappropriately depicted as a serious breach of security. Unnecessary press conferences are to be avoided.

2.5.3 The propaganda success that PIRA has gained by disrupting London's transport system has not come from the inconvenience itself. (Indeed, London commuters have been gratifyingly bloody-minded - sometimes on camera - about their determination not to be thwarted). PIRA's success has come from ill-judged comment, such as a London borough council leader's inexplicable remark that a day's disruption during the Christmas shopping period had cost London £43 million. 'Instant expert' comments by people in authority can be unhelpful and should be avoided.

3. CONCLUSION

- 3.1 While closer inter-departmental/agency co-ordination is always desirable, our immediate causes of concern lie outside those who routinely deal operationally with terrorism. They lie instead with those who have similar responsibility, but a low incidence rate; or those with who clearly feel a duty to be concerned or to comment, but who are not sensitised to the contribution which that makes to the cause of Irish Republican terrorism.
- 3.2 The objectives and tactics described above are espoused by the ACPO Advisory Group, discussed with Chief Officers (briefings and seminars) and debated at the National Conference of Police Press Officers. The need for more formal guidance is an issue. This might equally apply to all agencies/parties who have an informed part in the counter-terrorist effort.
- 3.3 It is also apparent that Ministers and senior public officials could be instrumental in emphasising the criminality of terrorists wherever appropriate; in promoting key messages about the need for public vigilance; and in not feeding the news process by their own actions.
- 3.4 On present evidence, there is little need for a change in strategy or tactics - simply their reinforcement and application nationwide. This could be made the subject of periodical collective review by the respective Directors of Information (or equivalents) from the Home Office, MPS, NIO, RUC, Defence, and any others considered relevant.

New Scotland Yard
July 1992