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2. THE NEW DEFENCE FORCE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee considered a memorandum by the Defence Secretary (OPD(69) 57) setting out proposals for a new locally-recruited part-time military defence force in Northern Ireland to undertake some of the tasks at present performed by the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC).

THE DEFENCE SECRETARY said that his proposals took account on the one hand of the need to abolish the USC in order to placate Catholic opinion and on the other of the need to replace it by a force which would be regarded by Protestant opinion as an adequate substitute. The essential differences distinguishing the new force from the USC were that it would be under the control of the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Northern Ireland and not of the Northern Ireland Government, and that it would have a more limited role which would not include riot or crowd control. It was important to attract a substantial number of former USC members to the new force and also that it should include a reasonable proportion of Catholics: and some features of his proposals were designed to that end. The prime military aim of the force was to counter the threat of Irish Republican Army activity. This threat varied from year to year but was always present, and in the absence of the new force a significant and highly unwelcome increase in the size of the regular forces deployed in normal times in Northern Ireland would be required to meet it. It was important to set up the new force quickly if the present somewhat fragile consensus which seemed to have emerged following the publication of the Hunt Report were not to collapse, and with the agreement of the Leader of the House plans had been made to enact the necessary legislation before Christmas. He intended that recruitment should open on 1st January 1970, and that the force should begin operating on 1st April 1970 enabling the USC to be phased out on 1st June 1970. Such a time-table would entail publishing a White Paper on 12th November. He proposed to release the text of the draft White Paper, with any amendments which might be made in discussion in the Committee, to the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Major Chichester Clark, in confidence later that day. The Minister of Defence for Administration could visit Belfast on Monday, 3rd November, to discuss any points of difficulty. The Northern Ireland reaction could then be reported to the Cabinet when it discussed his proposals later that week.

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31.10.69.

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Sir Philip Allen
Mr. Cameron
Mr. Hopkins
Parly Clerk.

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THE DEFENCE SECRETARY said that a number of points in his proposals might arouse controversy. Among these were the title of the force, in which the Northern Ireland Government would want to incorporate the word "Ulster"; the establishment ceiling of 6,000 which, though based on an assessment of military needs, compared with the figure of 4,000 mentioned in the Hunt Report; and the provision whereby some members of the new force would be authorised to keep arms and ammunition in their homes. All of these points, in the atmosphere of Northern Ireland, had strong political overtones. There was also the delicate question of the relationship in matters affecting the force through the proposed Security Committee, between the GOC Northern Ireland and the Northern Irish Government. His proposals were an attempt to find a middle course which both contending pressure groups could accept.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that he was in general agreement with the Defence Secretary's proposals. He considered, however, that it might in the event prove necessary to concede the inclusion of "Ulster" in the title of the new force. A decision on this point would have to be made in the light of Major Chichester Clark's reaction to the proposals in the draft White Paper as a whole. He would like a senior Home Office official to accompany the Minister of Defence for Administration on his proposed visit to Belfast. On the question of numbers, it had to be remembered that any increase on the figure of 4,000 mentioned in the Hunt Report, whatever its military justification, would be regarded by the Protestants as a victory and by the Catholics as a defeat.

In discussion, it was explained that from a purely military viewpoint, two factors largely determined the size of the force required, i.e. the number of key points, road blocks, etc., to be guarded, and the fact that it was undesirable, in a part-time force, for men to be called out for duty more frequently than one night in eight. At the height of tension during the summer about 800 members of the USC were being called out on these duties each night. More recently the number required per night had been somewhat reduced but it still exceeded 600. It was principally for these reasons that the GOC considered that a force of much less than 6,000 would be too small.

In further discussion, there was general agreement that while we should if possible avoid including the word "Ulster" in the title of the new force, a final decision could best be taken in the light of the Northern Ireland Prime Minister's reactions. It was recognised that the

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question of the establishment ceiling of the force was also bound to be politically sensitive but it was pointed out that the real answer to Catholic fears that the new force might turn out to be the USC in another guise lay in the fact that the new force was firmly under the control of the GOC. There would be some advantage, however, in stressing in the White Paper that numbers had not been finally decided and suggesting that, in the immediate future at least, the figure of 6,000 was unlikely to be approached. This might be done by amending the end of the last sentence of paragraph 6 of the White Paper to read: "... in the light of experience as the build-up proceeds, but in any case will not ultimately exceed 6,000 officers and men."

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that, on the question of cost, he could not at this stage accept the need for specific additions to Defence Budget targets already agreed. If any adjustment proved necessary in the light of the new commitment, it could be made during the normal course of Estimates scrutiny.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee were generally in favour of the Defence Secretary's proposals and agreed that, subject to the amendment noted, the draft White Paper should be released in confidence to the Northern Ireland Prime Minister. The Minister of Defence for Administration should hold himself available for discussions with Major Chichester Clark on 3rd November; he should be accompanied by a senior Home Office official. In the light of the outcome of these discussions, the proposals should be submitted to the Cabinet as soon as possible thereafter. The question whether the cost of the new force required any specific addition to the agreed Defence Budget allocations for 1970-71 and subsequent years should be decided in the course of the normal processes of Estimates scrutiny.

The Committee -

- (1) Endorsed the proposals in OPD(69) 57, subject to the points made in the Prime Minister's summing up.
- (2) Invited the Defence Secretary to arrange for the draft White Paper to be discussed with the Northern Ireland Prime Minister on the lines envisaged, and to circulate his proposals for consideration by the Cabinet at its next Meeting.

Cabinet Office, S.W.1.

31st October 1969

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