



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

21 December 1979

Dear Mr Bryan.

Thank you for your letter of 7 December enclosing a petition about demonstrations held by Iranians in this country and suggesting that those who take part in them should be deported.

It may be helpful if I first mention some factual points about the particular demonstrations to which your constituents referred. I understand that the police estimated the size of the larger demonstration at 2,500 not 10,000 as stated in the "Guardian". It was organised by the Muslim Solidarity Committee and although many of the participants were Iranian, others were members of various Muslim communities in Britain. Thanks no doubt at least in part to the efforts of the police, that demonstration, although noisy, passed off without major incident.

Nevertheless, I sympathise greatly with the feelings which lie behind your constituents' letter. The traditional position in this country is, as you know, that any group of people, whatever their nationality, is free to organise and to express its views in public, however objectionable those may be to others, provided that in so doing it does not break the law. If the law is broken, then it is the responsibility of the police and the courts to enforce it. I think you yourself recognise that to ban particular groups of people from demonstrating would be a novel step in a democracy.

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Somewhat similar considerations apply to the use of the power to deport people (which applies of course only to non-patrials) in cases like this. Although the Home Secretary can order the removal of any person whose deportation he deems to be conducive to the public good, it would be entirely novel were he to do so against someone who had simply exercised his freedom to demonstrate. Of course, deportation can take place on the recommendation of a court following conviction for an imprisonable offence. So here again action can be taken if the law is seriously broken, but an individual is free to demonstrate his views in public provided he remains within the law.

That brings us back to the law. I do think we need to look at the law on public order to see if we have got right the balance between the interests of the community on the one hand and of those who wish to demonstrate on the other. Willie Whitelaw is at present pressing ahead with a review of the Public Order Act and related legislation of which this is the primary object. I have, therefore, ensured that he is fully aware of our correspondence.

Yours sincerely
Raymond Whelan
