



*Subject filed
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A
kind as to: Tom McCaffrey

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

3 May 1976

Prime Minister's meeting with Mrs. Thatcher:
Northern Ireland Force Levels

As you know, the Prime Minister decided to have a meeting with the Leader of the Opposition in advance of any publicity about the decision to withdraw the Spearhead Battalion from Northern Ireland without replacement on 6 May (my letter of 29 April refers). Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Airey Neave called on the Prime Minister in the House of Commons at 4.30 p.m. this afternoon, and your Secretary of State was present.

The Prime Minister acknowledged that the Government would of course have to take its own decisions in Northern Ireland, as on other questions, but said that he wanted to take the Opposition's views into account as far as possible in reaching such decisions. He wished to put Mrs. Thatcher in the picture on one operational matter, and referred to the decision to send in the Spearhead Battalion in January this year. Although there was still a substantial amount of killing in the Province, the GOC had recommended, and both the Secretaries of State for Defence and Northern Ireland had agreed, that the general security situation no longer required the deployment of the Spearhead Battalion in the Province. He had himself accepted that recommendation, and although it was not normal to make announcements of deployments of this sort, the facts were bound to become known shortly. He believed that, by redeploying the military forces in the Province and by appropriate redeployment of the RUC, it would still be possible to give adequate security cover in Armagh.

Mrs. Thatcher said that her instinctive political reaction was that there would be criticism of this decision. To an outsider with no privileged information, the situation in Northern Ireland appeared to be getting worse, rather than better; in these circumstances, a withdrawal of troops from South Armagh seemed to be the last thing that one should do in political terms, and she thought that there was a risk that it might create a wave of alarm. Mr. Rees explained the basis on which the Spearhead Battalion was deployed, and emphasised that its withdrawal would not result in any diminution of the total number of troops in South Armagh. The troops which would be taken out of Belfast in order to be sent there would be able to remain for a longer period than would be possible for the Spearhead Battalion. There were at present a significant number of military policemen in the Protestant areas

of East Belfast, and the GOC thought that it would be right and justified to move them elsewhere.

Mrs. Thatcher said that the decision to withdraw Spearhead now raised questions as to why the Battalion had been put in in the first place. Mr. Rees said that the RUC had, in the past, been a very problematical force, but he was now convinced that they could adequately deal with the situation in East Belfast, and that their deployment there could release adequate troops for Armagh. He recalled that he had given an assurance to the Member of Parliament for Armagh last week that there would be no diminution in the number of troops there.

Mr. Airey Neave referred to a recent visit to Northern Ireland and to the SAS; and said that, in his view, it had been a very good decision to send them to Armagh. Mrs. Thatcher agreed, and said that she thought the first thing the Government should do was to let it be known that the SAS would be staying, if this was the case. The Prime Minister said that it was for decision whether an announcement should be made, or whether the news of the Spearhead's withdrawal should merely come out. In either case, he thought that it would be right to emphasise that the SAS were staying, that the Royal Marine Commandos were going in to South Armagh and that the Reserve Battalion could come back very quickly, if necessary.

Mr. Rees referred to the forthcoming report on the role of the police in Northern Ireland, and said that it should be ready in about 5 weeks, although it would not be suitable for publication. The Prime Minister suggested that a copy should be made available to Mrs. Thatcher and said that he would welcome a longer, private talk on the future of the security situation in the Province if Mrs. Thatcher would like that, after she had seen the report.

In conclusion, it was agreed that nothing should be volunteered to the press about this meeting, but that if Mrs. Thatcher was questioned at any time about her talks with the Prime Minister, she would say that she saw the Prime Minister from time to time "on wholly confidential matters".

I am sending copies of this letter, on a similarly personal basis, to Tony Cragg (Ministry of Defence) and to Chris Brearley (Cabinet Office).

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