

PRIME MINISTER

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I attach a brief statement which Mr. Whitelaw gave this afternoon.

The Home Secretary felt that, in the event, it had been right to say something today.

Mr. Hattersley had a number of specific questions, but said that he would be quite content to await detailed answers in the Home Secretary's opening speech tomorrow. He wanted to know what type of CS gas would be used, what rules would apply for its use, and what risks were involved; whether the other proposals "associated with the Home Secretary" following his meeting with the Backbench Committee on Monday night had been abandoned; and how the new arrangements in respect of CS gas and plastic bullets differed from the arrangements in force at the time of the Toxteth riots. He also sought confirmation from the Home Secretary that there would be no pressure to employ the new measures on those Chief Constables who were known to be opposed to the use of CS gas and plastic bullets. In closing, Mr. Hattersley said that the Opposition certainly wished to see the police properly equipped for their role, but were fundamentally opposed to a change in the character of British policing arrangements. The Home Secretary emphasised that responsibility for operations rested, as it always had done, firmly with Chief Constables. He stood firmly behind the traditional role of the police but he emphasised that conditions had to be restored where the traditional role could be exercised.

For the Liberals, Alan Beith stressed that some rioters were trying to destroy the relationship between the police and the public. For this reason, the Home Secretary should be very cautious in escalating police reaction. Mr. Whitelaw said that he was well aware that many Chief Constables took the same view. Sam Silkin wanted the Home Secretary to consider reserving the extreme weapons to his own authority.

/Mr. Whitelaw

Mr. Whitelaw undertook to consider this, but pointed out that, however available the Home Secretary might be, there could be circumstances where the best decision could only be taken on the spot by the Chief Constable. Arthur Lewis wanted a commendation for the bravery of unarmed ambulancemen, whilst Norman Atkinson claimed that the Home Secretary had abdicated his responsibility to Chief Constables and wanted to know what guarantee there was that these new weapons would not be used against pickets, peaceful demonstrators, and the like.

On the Government side, Michael Hamilton welcomed the news that the Rollestone Camp would be re-opened and pointed out that, when it was last used, the prisoners lived better than their guards. Mr. Whitelaw said that the camp would be necessary even without the extra flow of prisoners caused by the troubles. Prison officers would staff it this time. Eldon Griffiths emphasised that most policing would remain traditional, and that the police did not themselves seek the new equipment. John Biggs-Davison asked what protest there had been from the Labour benches when plastic bullets were introduced in Northern Ireland. Toby Jessel asked the Home Secretary to confirm that responsibility for the police would remain with him and the Chief Constables, and that the new GLC Police Committee had no status.

One or two speakers started to broaden the argument away from the policing issue. Eric Heffer, whilst pointing out that policing was important, argued that the Government were not looking at the recent causes of the riots. Neville Sandelson said that the Government would ignore the social factors at its peril. Robert Kilroy-Silk argued that some of the recent rioters sincerely believed that they were the victims of discrimination. These comments may point the way to the future direction of the Opposition's attack. There was also a closing comment from Alex Lyon in relation to exchanges at Question Time yesterday: you had asked whether Mr. Foot

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supported water cannon and CS gas, yet the Home Secretary's statement had shown that neither he nor the Chief Constables actually wished to use these weapons except as a last resort.

MAP

c. Mr. Whitmore  
Mr. Gow

15 July 1981

STATEMENT BY THE HOME SECRETARY: 15 JULY 1981

EQUIPMENT FOR THE POLICE

TO BE CHECKED  
AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Speaker, with permission, I shall make the short statement which was requested yesterday in advance of tomorrow's debate by the Leader of the Opposition and the Rt. Hon. Gentleman the Member for Sparkbrook on the equipment available to the police. Naturally the whole House wants to see the police provided with sufficient means of protecting themselves and also of taking positive and effective action to deal with riotous behaviour.

To protect police officers special helmets are being provided in increasing numbers; fire resistant overalls have been ordered; and so have more standard shields and new lighter shields. Better protection has assisted chief officers in adopting positive tactics to break up violent groups. It is firmly the view of the chief officers who have been most closely involved that their most effective approach lies in training their officers and developing their tactics for mobile and positive public order policing.

But there may be extreme circumstances in which further equipment might be required in dealing with riots. I have, therefore, decided to make available to chief officers, who

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alone are responsible for the conduct of operations, a range of alternatives.

Different types of water cannon are being looked at by police forces to see which might suit their needs. Additional protection is being provided for normal police vehicles, and the need for specially protected vehicles will be urgently examined.

This brings me to CS gas and plastic bullets. Neither I nor chief officers wish to see these used except in the very last resort and under strict control, but they should be available. Stocks of CS gas have therefore been reviewed, and appropriate groups of officers will be trained in the proper use of plastic bullets. They will be used only on the authority of the chief officer himself. I shall be talking to chief officers about the circumstances in which such authorisation might be given.

Mr. Speaker, in opening tomorrow's debate I shall be speaking on other aspects of these matters and about the implications for the penal system.