

020
CONFIDENTIAL

Prime Minister

Mr. Fall tells me

that the first sentence over-
states the Foreign Secretary's

hesitations and thinks that he
would be content with the conclusion
in para. 11.

Ref. A084/477

PRIME MINISTER

Yes
The Polygraph Agree?

FERB

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has asked that the Ministers concerned should have an opportunity of reviewing the earlier decision to introduce a polygraph pilot scheme as recommended by the Security Commission in their Report on Geoffrey Prime. This request follows, I understand, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's meeting with Mr Charles Irving MP and a delegation of staff from GCHQ to protest at the changes which were announced on 25 January. I understand that the Secretary of State thinks that a decision to try the polygraph out somewhere else from in GCHQ might help to defuse the charged atmosphere on the de-unionisation issue. 10.2.

2. In their Report the Security Commission said that "the only measure of which one can say with any confidence that it would have protected GCHQ from Prime's treachery would have been the polygraph, because it would either have deterred him from applying to join or have exposed him in the course of examination". They therefore recommended that a pilot scheme should be undertaken to test the feasibility of polygraph security screening in the intelligence and security agencies. They said that the essential elements of the pilot scheme would be:-

- (a) the use of the polygraph for counter-intelligence examination only;
- (b) adverse polygraph indications not to be treated as a ground to withhold clearance without independent information;
- (c) the scheme to be administered by the Security Service; and
- (d) the scheme to embrace at least probationers and existing staff of the Security Service and GCHQ who have or will have access to information of the highest classification. (The Commission believed it would be useful to have the experiment in one Department staffed by civil servants and the other by staff who are not subject to precisely the same conditions as civil servants.)

CONFIDENTIAL

3. Ministers accepted the recommendations of the Commission and, in your statement of 12 May 1983, you said that in view of the conclusion of the Security Commission in relation to the polygraph and the extreme gravity of the damage caused by Prime, "the Government accept the Commission's recommendation that a full and thorough pilot scheme should be carried out. The Commission recognises that a polygraph examination is generally regarded as a disagreeable experience and would be seen by some as an unwanted invasion of their privacy. But we are dealing with matters of the highest national security, and those who have access to the nation's most sensitive secrets must expect to be subject to the most rigorous vetting procedures ...".

4. Since that time, we have been making progress with the pilot scheme. Two members of the Security Service have completed three months' training in the use of the polygraph from the CIA in Washington, and examinations of some of the senior staff, at this stage on a voluntary basis, have now started in the Security Service. It is also proposed that this developmental stage should include a few of the senior staff from GCHQ. The present plan is that, once any developmental difficulties have been resolved, the operators should be ready to start examining the less senior staff, selected on a random basis as far as possible from among those due for quinquennial review, in the spring.

5. The pilot scheme will take two years to complete (though it is hoped that an interim report will be possible at the end of the first year) and it is expected that some 500 examinations per year will take place, representing some 10 per cent of the staff of each organisation. When the pilot scheme ends and its results have been evaluated a decision will need to be taken on whether or not the polygraph should be introduced as part of security screening generally in the intelligence and security agencies.

6. Information on the efficiency and usefulness of the polygraph is conflicting. To talk about "reliability" in this context would be misleading: the polygraph examination does not and is not intended to prove guilt or innocence. What it does is to give an indication of a possible area of doubt which can be

CONFIDENTIAL

further examined by other means. Most of the "evidence" on efficiency and usefulness comes from the USA, and is both voluminous and conflicting. The purpose of conducting an experimental pilot study in this country is to acquire our own independent information about the feasibility of adding polygraph examinations to our armoury of security vetting measures by assessing the polygraph's potential for efficiency and usefulness in security screening in a British context.

7. The Civil Service trade unions have been totally opposed to the introduction of the polygraph for security screening from the beginning, and have mounted a considerable campaign against it. In October 1983, the Society of Civil and Public Servants published a glossy pamphlet entitled "The Case Against the Polygraph" and in December they held a full day's conference at the Royal Festival Hall to which they invited Dr David Lykken, a leading USA opponent of the polygraph, to be its principal speaker. The unions brought a delegation to see me on the subject; I made it clear that this was to be only a pilot or experimental study, and no decision to introduce a definitive scheme in GCHQ or to extend it to other parts of the Civil Service would be taken until the results of the pilot scheme had been carefully assessed. I said that there would be further discussions with representatives of the staff concerned before any such decision was taken. I also said that I was ready to see them again before the pilot scheme was launched on GCHQ if they wished, but I made it clear that the Government could not withdraw the decision to mount the pilot scheme recommended by the Security Commission. In your replies to Parliamentary Questions, eg to Mr Andrew F Bennett MP on 1 December, you made it clear that, although there had been conflicting evidence as to the value of polygraph examinations, this did not invalidate the need for a pilot scheme to test the feasibility of polygraph screening in this country. You also said that the Government had no plans to introduce legislation to control and limit the use of the polygraph or to extend its use into any other context than the British intelligence and security agencies.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

8. I understand that the polygraph continues to be used and valued in the NSA and (I think) the CIA, and the Security Service operators who have been learning to use it have been impressed by the results. On the other hand there is not much enthusiasm for the polygraph in the higher echelons of the Security Service, particularly in the light of some recent testimony to the United States Congress on its usefulness (or rather lack of it) and of a recommendation by a Congressional Committee against a proposed extension of its use in security screening in the United States Administration. So I think that it is well on the cards that when we have evaluated the pilot scheme we shall recommend against the introduction of a definitive scheme; and more likely still that we shall recommend against any extension of its use outside the security and intelligence agencies.

9. Nonetheless, to decide now not to run the polygraph pilot scheme in GCHQ would be to depart from the Security Commission's recommendation, and would diminish the amount and value of experience obtained from the scheme. The only other place to try it would be the SIS; but that was not included in the Security Commission's recommendation, and we could hardly say that we were trying the scheme in an agency which we do not avow.

10. Any departure from the agreed plan would be claimed as a victory by the unions. It might defuse the opposition to de-unionisation at GCHQ; but I think it might equally well encourage the unions to believe that, having pushed the Government off the polygraph, they could probably push the Government off de-unionisation.

11. My own recommendation would be that the pilot scheme should proceed as originally envisaged, though I would propose to suggest to the Security Service that they should go slow on the operation of the scheme in GCHQ until the dust has settled on de-unionisation.

12. If Ministers were minded to discontinue the polygraph pilot scheme in GCHQ, I would hope that no decision would be taken or announced until after 1 March, the closing date for replies to the GCHQ offer on de-unionisation.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

13. I am sending copies of this minute to the Lord President, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Employment.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

10 February 1984

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL



PRIME MINISTER

The Polygraph

I have read Sir Robert Armstrong's minute of 10 February (A084/477) about the polygraph. I hope it will be possible to have a meeting at which the further handling of this sensitive issue can be fully discussed.

I am sending copies of this to Geoffrey Howe, Leon Brittan, Michael Heseltine, Tom King and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

How

13 February 1984

CONFIDENTIAL

13 FEB 1984



CONFIDENTIAL



Not sent

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

THE POLYGRAPH

The Prime Minister has seen your minute of 10 February (A084/477). Subject to the views of her colleagues, she is content with the recommendation in paragraph 11 of your minute.

I am sending a copy of this minute to the recipients of yours.

R.E.B.

13 February, 1984