

Whitelaw silences his Tory critics

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By Julian Haviland, Political Editor

Mr William Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, last night silenced his critics among Conservative backbench MPs with a fighting defence of his rule at the Home Office and an unspecified promise of stronger police powers to deal with suspected offenders.

Supporters of his liberal regime, as well as his personal friends, turned up in force to a meeting of the party's home affairs committee at the Commons to defend him against some who were out for his blood. They had reason to expect trouble.

Recently there has been much private blaming of the Home Secretary for uncertain leadership by MPs anxious about the rise in certain categories of crime. In turn, many MPs whose constituency annual meetings fall at the end of March have been facing questioning by anxious local parties. Ninety-six Tories have signed a Commons motion supporting the Police Federation's call for capital punishment to be brought back.

But in the end there was no contest last night. Mr Whitelaw's protectors demonstrated with applause when he entered the room, and again when the chairman, Mr Edward Gardner, QC, welcomed him.

After he had spoken, only two of 15 MPs who followed were critical—Mr Tony Marlow, Northampton, North, and Mr Teddy Taylor, Southend, East—and neither strongly so. Mr Gardner commented that the meeting was "one of the most remarkable demonstrations of support for the Home

Secretary that one can remember".

Mr Gardner said that after Mr Whitelaw had given a satisfactory review of Home Office policy, the questioning was "almost entirely favourable and friendly", something which he, Mr Gardner, found surprising. He thought this was because the Government has provided for an increase in police numbers, has brought in a new legislation for treating young offenders, and has started a new prison buildings programme.

Mr Whitelaw faced the expected calls for the restoration of capital and corporal punishment, to which he is known to be opposed.

The Home Secretary said he hoped to legislate for some of the proposals to strengthen police powers put forward by a recent royal commission, but he did not specify. He did indicate, however, that he intends to change the law so that people who have served prison terms will no longer be able to serve on juries, something for which many MPs have pressed.

Mr Whitelaw also told the party that the police were determined to deal with any outbreak of violence which might mark the anniversary of last year's riots in the English cities, beginning with the outbreak in Brixton, south London, last April. He said there was some risk of trouble because of what he called the "anniversary technique" by which trouble makers promote demonstrations.

Referendum opposed, page 2