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MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND UNIONIST MPs HELD ON 27 JUNE TO DISCUSS PARADES AND MARCHES

Present: Secretary of State
Mr Coulson
Mr Wood
Mr Bickham
Mr Daniell

Mr Molyneaux
Mr McCusker
Rev Martin Smyth

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Mr Molyneaux said that if the intention was to experiment on banning and rerouting marches, then the authorities had chosen the wrong year to adopt such a policy. He asked the Secretary of State to explain the real reasons behind the new tough line. In 1972 Lord Whitelaw had asked Mr Molyneaux for advice on whether to maintain Brian Faulkner's policy of banning parades. The advice was that the ban had been a significant factor in the fall of Mr Faulkner's Government and had led to the events of Bloody Sunday. Enforcement of the bans was associated with an increase in Republican terrorism. The decision to allow marching to resume was not merely a question of taking a step in the direction of normality; it was also recognition that such a move would reduce tension and free the security forces to deal with terrorism. It was unreal to suggest now that banning and diverting marches would save security force resources. Mr Maginnis had told Mr Molyneaux of a case where in May a loyalist march had been rerouted away from a Catholic street with the full co-operation of the organisers; yet the RUC had felt it necessary to have armoured land-rovers parked in side-streets, deploying far more men than would have been necessary to police the parade on its normal route.

2. Mr McCusker reported that a member of the Police Federation, attending the renewal debate, had asked him why the Chief Constable should now want to open up a second front. A very serious situation was developing in Portadown. The legitimate leadership of the Orange Order in the area had been supplanted by an unofficial sub-committee for purposes of organising the parade; the Orange leaders had stood aside in favour of people who if provoked would seek to incite a riot. If attempts were made to

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divert the march away from the "Tunnel" on Sunday 7 July, it was just possible that the RUC would succeed in holding the line against what was essentially a church parade. However in such circumstances a degree of resentment would build up which would lead to serious trouble on 12 and 13 July; the RUC would not be able effectively to control much bigger and more highly charged crowds on those days.

3. Mr McCusker said that the marches originated in the early nineteenth century when the route took them through countryside. The area had been built up over the years; in recent years the contentious part of the route had developed into a Catholic inner city slum area. Protestants had moved out and Catholics were being re-housed when they had the opportunity. In the critical Parkside development there were 49 dwellings of which only 16 fronted the road; and Mr McCusker produced a street plan showing that between Parkside and Obins Avenue of the fifty or so dwellings fronting Obins Street, some 25 were unoccupied. Yet the route favoured by the RUC would take the marchers close to Catholic housing estates with several hundred dwellings, from many of which there would be a clear view of the marches. If the RUC were to divert the march from its traditional route the local perception would be that this was due to pressure from Sinn Fein. The Rev Martin Smyth wondered whether pressure from Dublin was behind the new approach on marches or a determination to show the RUC as even-handed, able to act against loyalists.

4. The Secretary of State said that there was no general policy of banning parades and no pressure from Dublin, although it was always possible that the Irish would raise the matter in the coming weeks. Decisions were taken in the light of local circumstances. The Secretary of State had banned a march in Castlewellan for the second time because he was satisfied that it would be provocative; but the question of routes at Portadown was a matter for the Chief Constable who worked on the basis of assessments provided at the local level. The Secretary of State did not know what decision would be taken, but agreed to pass on the deputation's points to the Chief Constable in whose judgement he had absolute confidence. The Secretary of State would support the Chief Constable in whatever he decided. On the question of the resources needed to enforce bans or decisions to reroute, it was necessary to take a

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long term view; while there might be a heavy deployment of police in the first year it was to be hoped that this would not be necessary in subsequent years when people came to realise that it was not sensible to allow routes to remain unchanged year after year when it was clear that they amounted to provocation.

5. Mr McCusker said that part of the problem was that he felt unable to communicate with the Chief Constable. He had met Sir John three years ago at a British Irish Association Conference and suggested to him that he might be better to stay in Northern Ireland to concentrate on policing rather than concerning himself about international affairs. The Chief Constable clearly resented this attitude. Moreover, having been advised by Mr McCusker and others not to keep an open door to politicians he had now gone to the other extreme and refused to meet them at all. Mr Molyneaux told of how the Chief Constable had suggested through an intermediary that he should "keep his nose out of Fermanagh" at a time when, as successor to Harry West as party leader, he felt it necessary to maintain a particular interest in the county. The Secretary of State said that it was difficult to achieve the right balance on accessibility of the Chief Constable to politicians. He suggested that Mr Molyneaux should give some thought to the matter so that they could discuss it again.

6. Mr Molyneaux said that we were too close to the brink to be worrying about communication with the Chief Constable over the next two weeks; for the moment the Secretary of State would have to be the channel of communication. Official Unionists accepted that there were now too many bands of the "kick the Pope" type getting involved in legitimate Orange marches; and it was important to make a distinction between traditional Orange marches and the independent Orange parades, the latter being essentially Paisleyite. It would be a disastrous mistake for the Chief Constable to respond to the provocative rowdy elements by attempting to take on the main body of respectable marches. The Chief Constable had to be pushed back from the brink of "detonating Northern Ireland". If he were pushed back from the brink, then the three Official Unionist MPs at the meeting could assist the Secretary of State in seeking to reduce the number of coat-trailing parades and in reducing the influence of the more rowdy elements.

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7. Mr McCusker said that he hoped that a compromise would be possible in Portadown. The church parade on 7 July would by its nature be a less heated affair than the marches on 12 and 13 July. Perhaps the Sunday parade could be left to follow the usual route while constraints could be imposed on the marches on 12 and 13 July. That would be a reasonable stance - better than causing offence on the Sunday, thus increasing tensions for the subsequent two marches. Mr McCusker proposed to speak along these lines to the Divisional Commander.

8. In discussion with officials after the meeting, the Secretary of State asked that the Chief Constable should be quickly informed of the points made about Portadown. Mr Coulson agreed to arrange this in conjunction with Mr Stephens. Also, the Secretary of State said that he wished to discuss the question of marches with the Chief Constable (in a forum other than SPM). I should be grateful if this could be mentioned when officials report to the Chief Constable on the outcome of this meeting. Private Office will then make the necessary arrangements with the Chief Constable's Office.

cc:-PS/Secretary of State(L&B)-
 PS/Ministers(L&B)-
 PS/PUS(L&B)-
 PS/Mr Bloomfield -
 Mr A W Stephens -
 Mr Brennan
 Mr Buxton -
 Mr Ferneyhough -
 Mr Merifield -
 Mr Chesterton
 Mr Gilliland -
 Mr Wood
 Mr Coulson -
 Mr Lyon
 Mr Reeve -
 Miss Elliott
 Mr Bickham
 Mr K Carlisle MP

J A Daniell
 J A DANIELL
 Private Secretary

28 June 1985