

E.R.

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cc PS/Mr Scott (B&L)
PS/PUS (B&L) 20/3
~~PS/Mr Bloomfield~~ ✓
Mr Buxton

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PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L)

PROCESSIONS AND MARCHES

I was able to talk fairly briefly about this subject with the Chief Constable this morning. He said he was glad I had raised it as he had been wondering how we were getting on with it.

2. Without bringing Bishop Eames' name into the conversation, I outlined the possible courses described in Mr Bloomfield's minute of 14 March and asked how he felt about them. He was not very precise in his reply but I think it amounted to the following.

3. His instinct would be to encourage the Secretary of State to challenge the Orange and Black leadership over the whole business of traditional marches, at the moral level: pointing out the sheer unreasonableness and injustice of their continuing to insist on going through or past the same areas as of yore, quite irrespective of whether the communities living in those areas had changed completely. For the nationalists this was a massive dose of inequality. He spoke with some fervour about this - I would guess partly because he was feeling sensitive to criticism of the RUC's handling of Sunday's AOH parade in Portadown.

4. However, he recognised and reluctantly accepted that an appeal for new attitudes which was pitched at this level and argued on these grounds would be at best unfruitful and probably heavily counter-productive: partly because the arguments could be regarded as no more than a matter of opinion, partly because even if the leadership accepted them they would not be able to carry their rank and file once the jeering started from the DUP about going soft. The logic of this was that the appeal should be very direct and very matter of fact and should be confined entirely to the practical and utilitarian argument of strain on the police - which the leadership could accept, and could defend to the rank and file, without having to concede any points of principle or philosophy.

CONFIDENTIAL

5. The Chief Constable was a little hesitant to encourage the Secretary of State to mount a case which might seem to imply that the RUC could not cope and were moaning. On the other hand, it would undoubtedly be extremely welcome from the RUC's point of view if the march organisers were to concede some route changes at the most difficult spots. On balance he would like the Secretary of State to have a go. But it would have to be done very soon if it was to have any bearing on this summer's activities.

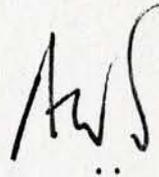
6. My own views are very close to what I understood to be the Chief Constable's. I am all for trying to get a public debate going on the subject of traditional marches, but that will clearly be a long process. In the meantime I believe it is worth trying to squeeze some help out of the Orange and Black leadership, of a kind that they will then be able to deliver, in time for this summer. I think that any such approach will need to be set firmly in the context of concern about releasing maximum police effort to combat terrorism and other crime. It is factually incontrovertible that a processional route which takes in a number of potential flashpoints will substantially drain police effort and place an extra strain on individual police officers. (This is not just a matter of the financial cost.) Surely this is not what the Unionist community wants to see?

7. As the Chief Constable says, any approach which is going to have any chance of influencing this year's marching season will have to take place extremely soon. I suggest that it would still be worth trying to find out whether James Molyneaux and Martin Smyth could be available together for a talk with the Secretary of State, whether at Westminster or in Northern Ireland, during the next couple of days. (I do not believe that a letter would have anything like the same impact.) An approach as soon as that would of course rule out any possibility of having floated a public statement before the meeting, but I doubt if that is crucial; in fact I would see some advantage in waiting to decide what to say publicly on the subject until after we knew how the Orange and Black leadership had responded in private.

E.R.

CONFIDENTIAL
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8. The Secretary of State would have to be ready to deal with the question "Are you intending to make similar appeals to others?" I think the answer should be affirmative - but going on to explain that marching seasons vary and the other people concerned do not have to be approached quite so soon.



A W STEPHENS

19 March 1985

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