

Special Branch Activities

Note of a Meeting between the Home Secretary and certain Members of Parliament on 30th April

1903

Present: Home Secretary
Mr. Gwynoro Jones
Mr. Prescott
Mr. Atkinson
Mr. Skinner
Mr. Sedgmore
Mr. Wellbeloved
Mr. Norris

Mr. Prescott said that they had come to see the Home Secretary because they were concerned about Special Branch activities in the industrial field and the relations that might exist between management and the Special Branch. They felt there was a need for an enquiry in the light of recent events. Their assumption was that the Special Branch should direct their attention to activities which endangered the security of the State, but this was insufficient to account for an interest Special Branch members seemed to be taking in civil rights organisations, such as the National Council for Civil Liberties, and industrial organisations. He believed there were instances of the Special Branch taking photographs of people at meetings and demonstrations and composing lists of names of those participating, and there were exchanges of information between the Special Branch and employers and between the Special Branch and trade unionists. Evidence to support this had emerged from the Pilkingtons strike, the national building strike and the seamen's strike in 1966. Information was exchanged between trade unionists and the Special Branch which enabled the identification of people from photographs, and when Mr. Harold Wilson as Prime Minister had referred to subversion in the National Union of /Seamen, it was

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Seaman, it was presumably to the Security Services he had referred when saying he had the information from "the people who should know". Now that the Home Secretary had the report on the Lennon enquiry, he should consider whether further action or investigation was necessary, such as an enquiry by the Security Commission into the activities of the Special Branch. Questions to which he felt an answer should be given included:

- (a) Who decided on the people to be regarded as a special threat in the industrial field?
- (b) What were the rights of those asked to assist the police, for example by identifying particular individuals?
- (c) What use could employers make of the Special Branch and their information?
- (d) Whether members of the Special Branch acted in an agent provocateur role?

Mr. Wellbeloved said that the Littlejohn and Lennon affairs suggested that the circumstances were such that a Security Commission enquiry was desirable. An internal police enquiry was not good enough to satisfy Parliament and the public that all was well. It was unacceptable in his view to have what amounted to a political police force and there was therefore a need to have a reliable assessment of the operations of the Special Branch.

Mr. Atkinson said that Special Branch activity in the industrial field seemed to have intensified in the last two years. Enquiries by the police into trade unions had been taking place. It could be seen as a part of a general attempt to smear the trade unions. People were anxious and apprehensive and asked themselves what reason could

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there be for the police investigating matters relating to trade unions unless it was to enable the management to be warned of likely militancy. Basic questions were whether this was the right use for a branch of the police force and whether employers were entitled to information about employees and potential employees from Special Branch sources. There had been a recent discussion in the A.U.E.W. of the function of the police. Mr. Atkinson believed that there was a need for an investigation which would produce a report for debate in the House indicating whether or not current police activity appeared to be justified.

There was also, to his knowledge, no public information on the breakdown of police costs which would show what resources were devoted to Special Branch activities. He understood that the Special Branch was under the control of the Commissioner and through him the Home Secretary but there was no public knowledge of the number of people involved and such ignorance led to suspicion and alarm.

Mr. Sedgemore said that the public were entitled to know the role and remit of the Special Branch, the theoretical limit on their functions and the process by which they are accountable. Mr. Skinner said that they approached the meeting on the assumption that the Home Secretary himself would wish to consider very seriously the position of the Special Branch in the light of recent events, including the incident at Strachans. He personally thought that there was a role for a branch of the police concerned with security, but he could not see why this required an interest in trade unions. He had a long experience of trade union activities and demonstrations and at no time had come across activities that could be regarded as a threat warranting special attention.

/Mr. Prescott,

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Mr. Prescott, and Mr. Atkinson in particular, made it clear that they could produce a great deal more argument and evidence to support their statements, but were limiting what they had to say because of pressure of time.

The Home Secretary said that he would consider all that had been said and would see to what extent it was possible to provide further information. The Special Branch was not a separate police force and certainly not a political police force. It consisted of police officers responsible to their chief officers in the ordinary way. The Home Secretary had more responsibility in the Metropolitan area than elsewhere because the Commissioner was in some respects responsible directly to the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary, of course, had no concern with prosecutions and the like. There were special branches in other police forces. In no case were they exempt from ordinary police controls and disciplinary procedures. Their primary duty was to assist in the preservation of public order and the prevention and detection of crime, and it had to be remembered that the Metropolitan Special Branch had begun as a response to Fenian trouble. Their main efforts were directed against terrorist activities by the I.R.A. and more recently from other sources.

The Littlejohn affair was not primarily one affecting the Special Branch and he would be making a statement as soon as possible on the Lennon affair saying as much as it would be possible for him to say at present. The report he had asked for in relation to Lennon was a report of what the Special Branch had actually done, on the basis of which he could reach his own conclusions as to whether further investigations were necessary. It was not, therefore, right to see
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it in terms of a request for an enquiry by the police into allegations rather than an enquiry by some other method.

The Home Secretary said that having looked into the points raised, if he were persuaded that there was any abuse of power or impropriety, he would certainly be very much concerned. He did not rule out the possibility of an enquiry, but it would be misleading to suggest that as things stood and having heard what the Members had said, he thought it likely that he would arrange such an enquiry.

Mr. Atkinson stressed that he felt there were important questions of principle that needed to be discussed in the House and could not usefully be discussed except on the basis of a report following an enquiry of the kind they suggested. Such questions were whether the Special Branch should have any kind of inquisitorial role vis-à-vis trade unions and whether trade unionists or employers should have any right to obtain information from the police. For instance, should trade unionists have any right to obtain information from the police about the activities of members of their union executive.

The Home Secretary said that it was certainly his view that the police should not be in any way partisan. He would not support the proposition that unions as distinct, say, from employers should be singled out for attention, but, equally, he certainly could not support any suggestion that a person should be exempt from police attention because he was a member of a trade union. He was firmly advised that there was no question of Special Branch infiltration into trade unions directly or indirectly. At this point Mr. Prescott indicated
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that he felt sure that there was such infiltration. The Home Secretary said that he would be glad to have and consider any information to the contrary that Mr. Prescott had. If, having considered and enquired into the points raised, he felt that Special Branch activities were entirely within acceptable rules, he would not propose to take any further action. If he reached the opposite conclusion, he would certainly be very concerned and would consider the matter further.

2nd May, 1974

c.c.

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Sir James Waddell —
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