

15.3.76

MEMORANDUM

Commander 'Ops'

In order to review the current situation regarding the Special Demonstration Squad, I set up a working party, as directed by you, comprising Chief Superintendents R Wilson and [redacted] HN332 [redacted], together with Ch. Insp. Kneale and Det. Insp. Craft under my chairmanship.

I should, at the outset, say that during our deliberations I found complete agreement amongst all members on the issues we discussed. These can best be summarised as follows:

1. Certainly, the degree of violence associated with public demonstrations has declined since the formation of the Squad in 1968. However, if anything, the popularity of street demonstrations has increased, so that public issues like abortion, trespass, unemployment, civil liberties etc. have brought very large numbers onto the streets with the ever-present potential for public disorder.
2. With respect to the degree of coverage considered necessary by the SDS, two aspects are of primary importance. Firstly the degree of involvement and manipulation exercised by the 'ultra-left' in all protest organisations, particularly in ad-hoc committees formed to arrange major demonstrations. Secondly, the number of splinter-groups continually being formed, invariably consisting of militant elements. The latter do not recognise the need to liaise with police regarding proposed demonstrations and pickets, many of which are organised at short notice, and coverage within, or access to, these organisations is essential if adequate police arrangements are to be made.

Nevertheless, with the reduction in political public disorders, the strength of the SDS has gradually been reduced from the original 26 operational officers to the current 12 officers engaged in the field. It is agreed that this is the minimum coverage necessary to prove effective and might have to be increased if the situation deteriorated.

3. Bearing in mind that the primary task of the SDS is to provide intelligence in the public order field, it is difficult to proportion their value in this field compared with the "off-spin" information provided for the Security Service. For example, if an officer covers a meeting called to discuss whether to demonstrate or not, and the latter view prevails, then the only positive result of his attendance is seen in the subsequent report of individuals attending etc which is of interest to Box 500. Nevertheless his reasons for attending are of equal importance from a public order point of view.


Suffice it to say that the contribution made by the SDS to the national interests of the Security Service is a very considerable one; a point which is fully acknowledged.



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At the conclusion of the working party's deliberations, I spoke with DAC Gibson and Commander Fleming of 'A' Dept (Ops). I was assured that the information and assessments prepared by Special Branch regarding impending demonstrations is considered to be of extreme importance to the Uniform Branch, not only to assist in providing adequate police coverage but also to avoid over-reaction which could in itself lead to a provocative situation. In this respect, the Chief Superintendents of all operational Squads in the Branch speak most highly of the assistance rendered by the SDS.

The findings of the working party, therefore, are that there is every justification for seeking authority to continue the present working arrangements of the SDS, using a minimum number of 12 operational officers for this purpose.


Chief Superintendent

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