



PO BOX 500
LONDON SW1P 1XH

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25 October 1978

Dear Robert,

Thank you for your letter of 18 October. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss whether there is a need to update the 1970 terms of reference of Special Branches and what might be published about Special Branch work.

2. As you know, it has been our experience over the last year or so, as public questioning of the role of Special Branches (and of the Security Service) has become more explicit, that some Chief Constables have become uneasy about the public acceptability of the work their Special Branches undertake. In a number of cases Chief Officers have asked us for assurance that the work Special Branches do on behalf of the Security Service has the support of Ministers. In this connexion our Police Liaison Officers have found a ready market among Chief Officers for copies of the Hansard Report of the Secretary of State's reply to Robin Cook, MP in the Adjournment Debate on 24 May 1978 about Special Branch accountability. I have also found it useful to draw to the attention of some recently appointed Chief Constables a letter we sent to Chief Officers on 29 May 1974 with the agreement of your predecessor about subversive activities in industrial disputes, as an illustration of the backing the Home Secretary has given explicitly to Special Branch cooperation with us.

3. As I see it there are two related but separate requirements which we might discuss. First there is the possible need to update and reissue to Chief Officers a document, known to have the blessing of the Home Office (and the Home Secretary) setting out the terms of reference of Special Branches, including the work they do on behalf of the Security Service. Such a document would be intended primarily to reassure Chief Constables that the work their Special Branches do has the full support of the Home Office and I think it would not be suitable for publication. In this connexion I should say, however, that our Police Liaison Officers have not found among Chief Officers any criticism of the 1970 Terms of Reference as such and, in their view, it is unlikely that any wholesale revision is necessary.

Sir Robert Armstrong KCB CVO
PUS Home Office