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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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27 May 1971

You asked at our meeting on 24 May for some notes on how counter-subversion work at home might be made more effective.

2. I enclose a Memorandum on this subject. I have not cleared it within FCO since the subject is not primarily a FCO concern. FCO's contribution to this work is well established and not under question.

3. As, however, the ideas in the Memorandum derive to some extent from conversations and correspondence between No.10 and FCO, I am copying this letter and Memorandum to Donald Maitland.

Yours ever,

(G. F. N. Reddaway)

Sir Burke Trend, G.C.B., C.V.O.,
Cabinet Office.

COPIED TO:
Sir S. Crawford
Mr Daunt
Mr Crook
Mr Maitland

Handwritten notes:
2/6
Mr. Tyne (to see)
Mr. Tyne
JET
3/11

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COUNTER-SUBVERSION

Recent developments, including national industrial stoppages in which subversive forces have played a part, have underlined the need to fill a gap in our existing defences. The well-tried Whitehall machinery for analysing and assessing the subversive danger and for taking low-level and often effective counter-action is in sound working order; what is lacking is a high-level, informal Co-ordinating Group, consisting of Ministers and interested outsiders as well as officials, to consider, recommend and, as necessary, initiate action at critical moments.

2. The existing machinery consists of the Subversion at Home Committee, successor to the Anti-Communist (Home) Committee founded in 1950, which meets at regular intervals under the chairmanship of the Secretary to the Cabinet and on which the Home Office, the FCO (including IRD), the Department of Employment, the Security Service and, on occasion the Department of Education and Science are represented. A subordinate inter-departmental Working Group (the Home Regional Meeting), also meets monthly under the ex-officio chairmanship of the head of IRD. These bodies keep the subversive situation under constant review and have a record of some success, especially in the publicity field and, via IRIS Ltd., in certain key trade union elections. This is useful support activity which should be both continued and encouraged. The Working Group, however, necessarily lacks the weight and outside contacts required for decisive intervention. For this purpose, complementary machinery with positive Ministerial backing is required.

3. The Subversion at Home Committee and the Home Regional Group are essentially official in scope and are governed by the needs of official secrecy. The proposed Co-ordinating Group on Counter-Subversion would include non-officials from the outset and would necessarily be dependent on the discretion of its co-opted members. Such a parallel Co-ordinating Group would try to close the gap between Governmental knowledge and disapproval of subversive activity and effective action to counter it. Much of the present counter-subversion activity, valuable as it is, has been 'responsive', mainly meeting requests for assistance from established contacts in the press and the trade union field. Under the proposed strategy, not only would this activity be stepped up but, by involving such non-official organisations as the CBI and the Trade Unions, it would often be able to intervene decisively before a situation has grown to critical proportions.

4. The proposed Co-ordinating Group would be under Ministerial patronage (the precedent is the Lord President's Committee on the Approach to Europe). It would analyse the problem as a whole and study the range of possible counter-subversion measures, including the dissemination and leakage of information at present practised. It might, of course, decide that in many situations an increase in the dissemination of information was all that was required. But experience with the Lord President's Committee suggests that contact between a very few officials, party officials, MPs, and non-official bodies can produce much better results than can committees restricted to civil servants. Although such a Group would be more careful and discreet than the Lord President's, it would likewise need to co-opt and work through third parties and, to this end, should be flexible in membership.

5. The proposed Group might aim to encourage and support:
 - (a) the dissemination of information, as an extension of the existing work done by the FCO (IRD) under the auspices of the Subversion at Home Committee;
 - (b) the enlivening of the home information machine, especially in relation to the press, the BBC and the ITA; home information officers tend now to be unduly passive;
 - (c) positive counter-action against key subversive groups and individuals on the basis of informed appraisal of the problems involved.

6. Initially such a Group might be drawn from:
 - (a) a senior Minister without portfolio;
 - (b) Junior Ministers of the Departments of State as appropriate;
 - (c) the Secretary to the Cabinet (Chairman of the Subversion at Home Committee);
 - (d) the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary;
 - (e) the Home Office;
 - (f) the Department of Employment;
 - (g) the FCO and its IRD (the operational research body enjoying close liaison with the Security Service and with its existing outlets);
 - (h) the FCO Labour Adviser;
 - (i) the DTI Labour Adviser;
 - (j) such outside bodies as the CBI and the Trade Unions;
 - (k) influential anti-Communists (e.g. Lord Shawcross, Mr Woodrow Wyatt and like-minded representatives of the younger generation of politicians).

The Security Service presumably would not wish to be directly involved in the deliberations of the Group, but their covert assistance would, of course, be vital.

7. The difficulties are obvious. It may not be easy to keep at bay interested parties of the extreme right with an exaggerated view of subversion (e.g. Common Cause). It may also prove difficult in a necessarily all-party forum to be both active in controversial matters and neutral in relation to party. It would also be essential to avoid letting such a Group evolve into an organisation merely defending the status quo. Moreover, the Group would need to be sensitive to the changing nature of the subversive problem; it would need to be aware that in modern conditions, the Communist Party is often a force for relative moderation, that indeed it is so regarded by the New Left and that, while owing to its size it must remain the principal threat to national security, it is seldom nowadays the most immediate threat in Britain. The Group would also need to understand that exposure for its own sake can be counter-productive (as it may have been in the recent election of a Communist to the presidency of the National Union of Students) and that exaggerated press campaigns can inflate the standing of irresponsible groups (as at the time of the Vietnam demonstrations of 1968-70). These difficulties, however, should not prove insuperable.

27 May 1971.