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PRIME MINISTERBBC Panorama: Proposed Programme on
Intelligence Services

I sent you a minute about this (A02674) on 21st July. I was able to discuss that minute with Permanent Secretaries from the Home Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Northern Ireland Office and the Heads of the three Agencies concerned yesterday afternoon.

2. The conclusions can be summarised as follows:-

- (i) If it is possible by the exercise of sweet reason to persuade the BBC to drop the idea of the programme completely, that would be much the best outcome.
- (ii) The Heads of the Agencies are doubtful whether it would be prudent actually to use the power of veto to prevent the programme: they fear that the resulting row, with all the attention which it would focus on the intelligence services in the media, could do the intelligence services more damage than a Panorama programme limited to whatever extent it might be possible to limit it. They agree that in discussion with the BBC at this stage the possibility that the veto might be used should not be foreclosed.
- (iii) If it is not possible to persuade the BBC to drop the programme, then as fall-back we should do our best to limit its scope and in particular to persuade the BBC to stop pursuing its inquiries into the functions and working of the intelligence services.
- (iv) A programme limited to accountability would in theory limit the damage, and that might have to be accepted, if that was as far as the BBC could be persuaded. But there was considerable scepticism at my meeting as to whether a worthwhile programme could be produced on that basis, or whether the BBC would in fact stick to the limitation.



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- (v) On the whole the meeting thought that the BBC should be approached from a higher level, though we were told that Sir Ian Trethowan had said that it was easier for him to act responsibly (as he saw it) because he was not being put under pressure by the Government.
- (vi) If there was to be an approach, it should (for the reasons suggested in my minute) be from me, acting with your authority and on your instructions, to Sir Ian Trethowan. The Home Office should not be involved in it.

3. I am sending copies of this minute to the Secretaries of State for the Home Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Defence and Northern Ireland.

(Robert Armstrong)

24th July, 1980