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Ian Trethowan being as weak as I expected.

Minister Security content to leave matters as reported, without asking Home Sec to veto the programme?

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PRIME MINISTER

I hope George Howard will insist on seeing the programme before there is any question of its being broadcast.

BBC Panorama Programme on the Intelligence Services

I have now had a further talk with Sir Ian Trethowan.

2. Sir Ian Trethowan said that he was acutely conscious of the risk that the BBC might be, or be thought to be, exploited by Mr. Duncan Campbell and others of that kind, and that the BBC was determined to avoid that risk. On the other hand, since we last spoke, he had been strengthened in his opinion that it would be difficult to argue that accountability for the intelligence services was not a matter of legitimate public interest. He pointed out that Mr. Robin Cook's Bill, which had now been published for some time, was backed not only by left-wing Members of Parliament but also by one or two Government backbenchers, including Mr. Jonathan Aitken. He also said that the Panorama team had a number of interviews recorded in the United States and other foreign countries with such people as Mr. Richard Helms. Many of these interviews drew attention to the damage which had been done to the intelligence services in the United States and expressed the view that we had managed our affairs in these respects much better. The publication of such interviews would not be damaging to the interests of the services.

3. Sir Ian Trethowan said that he had therefore agreed that the Panorama team should continue to pursue its activities on the foreign side and on the Parliamentary side - by which I take him to mean the question of accountability. On the other hand he had told them that they were not to pursue their attempts to get material from present or former members of the intelligence services

4. I understand that the new Chairman of the BBC, Mr. George Howard, has also had a word with the Home Secretary on these matters. The reports which I have heard of that are consistent with what Sir Ian Trethowan said to me.

~ Passage deleted and retained under Section 3(4).


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I understand that Mr. Howard also told the Home Secretary that he had asked Sir Ian Trethowan to exercise personal responsibility and oversight over this programme, and to make sure that he himself saw and vetted the material before the programme was put out.

5. I think that we have now done as much as we can to limit the damage that is liable to ensue from a BBC Panorama programme on the intelligence services. It is still possible that Sir Ian Trethowan may decide at the end of the day that there should be no programme; but I am afraid that I do not think that that is very likely.

6. If we wanted to make sure that the programme would not take place, the Home Secretary would have to use his power of veto. We have to balance the damage that might be caused by the showing of the programme against the damage that would be caused by using the veto to prevent it. Even solely in terms of damage to the intelligence services, I think that the effects of using the veto might be more damaging - and that is the view of the Heads of the services themselves. There are also wider considerations of censorship: the veto has never been used to ban the showing of a particular programme to which the Government had objections, and its use, even to protect the intelligence services, would undoubtedly lead to a major political row.

7. There will no doubt be other opportunities nearer the time to reconsider this, but I judge that for the time being we have taken things as far as we can.

8. 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)

8th August, 1980

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