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From the Principal Private Secretary

2 October, 1980

Panorama Programme on the Intelligence

Services

The Prime Minister met the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Sir Robert Armstrong yesterday evening to discuss Sir Robert Armstrong's minute A03077 of 24 September reporting the latest position on the BBC Panorama programme on the Intelligence Services.

The Prime Minister said that she was very anxious to protect the Intelligence Services and she feared the purpose of those who were making the programme was to discredit those Services. The question to be decided was whether any further steps beyond the approaches which Sir Robert Armstrong had already made to Sir Ian Trethowan could be taken in order to safeguard the Services. If the programme was eventually shown, it would be difficult for Ministers to criticise the BBC as being totally irresponsible in transmitting it, if they could have prevented its broadcast but had done nothing to do so. These considerations pointed to writing to Sir Ian Trethowan on the lines set out in Sir Robert Armstrong's minute of 24 September warning him that to show the programme would be contrary to the national interest and even to being ready to use the veto. On the other hand, these courses had their own dangers, as Sir Robert Armstrong had explained in his minute.

The Home Secretary said that the Chairman of the Governors of the BBC had raised the matter of the programme with him earlier in the week. He believed, in the light of what Mr Howard had said, that Sir Robert Armstrong's approaches to Sir Ian Trethowan had had more effect than perhaps we had believed. The BBC appeared to be fully seized of all the arguments against the programme which had been put to them. Sir Ian Trethowan would see the programme once it was produced to decide whether it should be shown and if so, in what form. Mr Howard had also told him that Sir Ian Trethowan had met the Heads of both MI5 and MI6 and had claimed, surprisingly, that both had been comparatively relaxed about the programme.

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The Home Secretary continued that he was inclined to think that further pressure on the BBC, reinforcing that which Sir Robert Armstrong had already applied, might well be counter-productive now. He saw the attractions of using the veto but to do so would jeopardise the Government's general relationship with the BBC. Moreover, the press would be wholly opposed to the use of the veto, and the Government might face considerable criticism from its own supporters. It might be worth paying all these prices if the veto would effectively prevent the damage the programme would do. But he did not believe that this would be the case, for those preparing the programme would see that its essential contents were leaked, and this would lead to as much continuing parliamentary and press interest in the Intelligence Services as if the programme had been transmitted in its original form.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that he would be ready to agree to the use of the veto but for the near certainty that the programme would be leaked. If the programme was shown and it did considerable damage to the Intelligence Services, the Government would be able to mount a telling attack on the BBC, showing that the Corporation had put Ministers in an impossible position where the threat of leaks had ruled out any possibility of using the veto.

Sir Robert Armstrong said that since the conversation between the Home Secretary and Mr Howard, Sir Ian Trethowan had seen Mr Sheldon and told him, amongst other things, that the prime issue about the programme was beginning to become one of whether the BBC ought to resist Government pressure. He had claimed that Mr Howard shared this view of the situation.

The Prime Minister said that she feared that the BBC would make minor changes in the programme to convince themselves that they were doing nothing which would seriously damage the Intelligence Services and that they would then go ahead and show it, arguing that they should do so in the interests of freedom of information. Nonetheless, the meeting agreed that there was no more that could be done at present to dissuade them from proceeding with the programme. Sir Robert Armstrong should continue to keep the matter under close review and bring further developments to their attention as necessary.

I am sending copies of this letter to George Walden (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Brian Norbury (Ministry of Defence), Roy Harrington (Northern Ireland Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

C.A. WHITMORE

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Home Office