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Rt. Hon. Dr. John Reid MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
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6th February 2007

Dear Home Secretary

ANTI-TERROR OPERATIONS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

I am writing both as a courtesy and to seek your personal assistance with the resolution of the attached Freedom of Information Request to your Department.

You will no doubt be aware of the understandable community, media and political speculation that surrounded last week's anti-terror operations in the West Midlands.

At the present time, we are particularly troubled by suggestions from community, media and (most-importantly) police sources, that so-called "Whitehall briefings" about operational matters may have undermined the best efforts of the local police service to brief the public in a timely, orderly, lawful and open manner. Press reports suggest that both Ministry of Defence and Home Office Press Offices appear to deny any informal briefings. In the circumstances, I hope that you will forgive my asking whether special advisers may have briefed certain journalists "off the record", in a manner which was no doubt in good faith, but nonetheless gives rise to a number of potential difficulties:

1. The traditional dangers with prejudicing the fair trials that must be the intended end-product of any police operation.
2. The perception that when the same personnel brief journalists on proposals to e.g. bring fundamental changes to the law to extend pre-charge detention in the same week or same breath, party politics may be trumping public safety considerations.
3. The grave danger that Central Government briefing undermines the direct operational secrecy and effectiveness of police work or, equally importantly, the trust of local communities in police intelligence and public information.

I hope that you will take this request in the spirit in which it is intended. Liberty's ambition is to ensure public trust in delicate police operations and the resultant criminal trial process. We believe that this may be best achieved by ensuring that public information about such operations is managed formally at a senior police level and that the practice of unaccountable "off the record" briefings, whether by police or political staff relating to ongoing investigations, is discouraged in the interests of security, justice and public trust.

I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

SHAMI CHAKRABARTI

Cc: Attorney General
Chief Constable of the West Midlands