

Duncan Campbell on the failings of the Diplock investigation

White Paper whitewash

THE GOVERNMENT's much heralded new 'supervision' of telephone tapping has turned out to be a damp and flaccid squib. Lord Diplock's report on the 'Interception of Communications in Great Britain' was published as a four-page, slim White Paper on Tuesday.

Like every other government paper on the subject, it entirely avoids discussing the bulk of the subject with which it is ostensibly concerned. The bulk of the 'interception of communications' is done by Government Communications Headquarters and the results passed to other agencies; they, like the Secret Intelligence Service, obtain their warrants on terms unspecified from the Foreign, Defence or Cabinet Secretaries, or the Prime Minister. None of this is discussed by Diplock.

Diplock, however, offers the results

of 'random checks' on the origins of phone tapping requests, the method of handling the material and the use to which it is put. He confirms what we alleged a year ago — that there are highly limited 'quotas' in operation for the number of phone taps the police can obtain — and that no such quotas apply to MI5, who have *carte blanche*. The Special Branch are quota-limited when they do not act jointly with MI5 — but their quota is counted separately from that of the rest of the police.

Amid Diplock's cooing reassurance that all is 'in the interests of the public weal', there is one glaring omission. The most unsatisfactory part of recent government statements has been the implausibly small numbers of warrants claimed to have been issued (400-500 in the last few years). It was anticipated that the first of Diplock's regular reports would provide new totals and some form of reassurance that numbers were under control. He does not; and he doesn't even confirm that the totals proffered by the government last year were accurate. He is not expected to produce any further public reports. □