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B.07434

MR POWELL

cc Mr Unwin
Mr Stark

Contingency Planning for Northern Ireland

I offered to provide advice on the Northern Ireland Secretary's minute of 29 April to the Prime Minister. I understand that the Defence Secretary will shortly send a minute to the Prime Minister on points of concern to him. When that has arrived, I will submit a draft minute for the Prime Minister.

2. I have discussed the subject with Mr Unwin as Deputy Chairman of the Civil Contingencies Unit. We agree that there is no early prospect of serious strikes in Northern Ireland. But the very fact that the Government has had so long to make contingency plans would intensify the criticism if those plans turned out to be defective. We have several points of concern -

a. It is most important that Ministers, in deciding how to deal with any threatened strikes in Northern Ireland, should have a clear idea of how long the contingency plans would maintain essential services. This could be a key factor in overall policy on such strikes. The Northern Ireland Secretary states (paragraph 4 of his minute) that it is unlikely that the contingency arrangements could be maintained for more than 3 weeks. I understand that there is no purely military justification for this statement. If true, it would represent a significant restriction on the Government's prospects of success in coping with a political strike. I believe that the Northern Ireland Secretary should be asked to explain his grounds for this conclusion.



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b. The Northern Ireland Secretary acknowledges the importance of management and senior technicians being available if MACM plans are to be implemented successfully. Indeed I understand the Ministry of Defence believe that there is little chance of the vitally important MACM plans for the maintenance of electricity and oil supplies succeeding in the absence of senior and middle management personnel. But in the circumstances being considered the prospects of political pressures, combining with the personal inclinations of a large number of middle and senior management, could create a significant risk of management not being available. Would it not therefore be prudent to consider importing the necessary management and technical personnel from Great Britain at least for these two industries? The answer will depend on technical questions among others; for instance whether the electricity generating plant in Northern Ireland, or a reasonable proportion of it, is familiar to such people in Great Britain. The NIO could consider this idea with the help of the Department of Energy, at least in a preliminary way, without having to consult people outside government.

c. The absence of MACM contingency plans for the distribution of essential supplies any further than the distribution centres (referred to by Mr King in his third paragraph) is probably inevitable, given the high numbers of service personnel that would be needed. But Mr King does not say who will administer the depots and issue the supplies to those calling for them; it seems that the MACM plan caters only for movement from docks to distribution centres. It would, in the circumstances being visualised, probably be unrealistic to expect private industry to undertake such work. It would be useful to know what contingency plans have been made to cover this task.



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d. Even though hospitals have not been affected by industrial action in the past there can be no guarantee that this will always be the case. At least an outline contingency plan would be a wise precaution.

e. No mention is made of an emergency ambulance service. In the past I understand the voluntary organisations (Red Cross, St Johns, etc.) have coped, with further assistance when needed from the RUC. In the circumstances envisaged ambulance work could be heavy and the RUC would be heavily committed on other tasks mentioned by Mr King - such as keeping essential routes open. It would therefore seem sensible to have a contingency plan to cover the risk of voluntary ambulance services not being able to cope.

C L G Mallaby

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