

Mr. M. Regan
27/9/88

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Prime Minister

CONTINGENCY PLANS FOR A POLITICAL STRIKE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

During the discussion in Cabinet on 25 July, a number of our colleagues spoke about the possible scale and nature of Unionist reaction to an Anglo-Irish agreement. I believe it would therefore be useful for you and other colleagues who are closely concerned to know how I see this prospect and how we would propose to meet it.

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2. I attach a paper which sets this out. The exact strength of Unionist feeling, how far it is cohesive and what forms of action are being contemplated will fluctuate week by week and clearly must be, and are being, separately and continuously assessed. We can, however, draw on the experience of previous years - especially 1974 and 1977 - in order to see what types of loyalist action we might expect to encounter; their likely order of seriousness; what specific effects they might have; and how each of them could best be dealt with. This paper makes such an analysis. It shows that the Government must ultimately be in the strongest position in any trial of strength, and that we have the means to counter and overcome even the more serious forms of reaction if we act with sufficient resolution and skill. It emphasises the importance of leaving no room for doubt about our determination to persevere with our chosen policy; the need to match politically inspired action with a primarily political response but to have, nonetheless, detailed comprehensive contingency plans; the need to avoid over-reaction; and the crucial importance of seizing and retaining the initiative in the media.

 3. As we all know, this is a risky business but I believe that if we were to decide that it was right to go ahead on roughly the present lines, ie without further major concessions to the Irish, then we would be able to contain the Unionist reaction, vociferous though this would certainly be.

 4. It will be evident from the paper and its annex that the most critical area of potential vulnerability is the power stations. We need therefore to be able to rely on the top management of the Northern Ireland Electricity Service to keep closely though

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discreetly in touch with us and, if need be, to give a strong and positive lead to their workforce, as was successfully done in 1977. It had been the intention that Mr John Gaston, who has previously combined the posts of Chairman and Chief Executive but has now been succeeded in the latter post, should also relinquish the chairmanship this autumn. I do not feel that it would be wise to go into what will clearly be a tricky few months with new occupants in both posts who lack his depth of local experience. A separate submission has therefore been made to you proposing that Mr Gaston should remain as Chairman until next March. As another precautionary step, my officials will be sounding the Departments of Employment and Energy about whether and how we might sensibly make personal contact with Mr John Lyons of the Electrical Power Engineers Association.

5. I shall, of course, keep you informed of developments. I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Secretaries of State for Employment and Energy, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Jonathan Dike-Evans

28 August 1985

DH
(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in his absence)

H.L.C.

PE/EC/PA
As/Dr Boyson(L+B)
As/Mr Scott(L+M)
As/PUS(L+B)
Mr. Blomfield
Mr. Brennan
Mr. Fell
Mr. Buxton
Mr. Fernyhough
Mr. Giddings
Mr. Hillier
Mr. Blackwell
Mr. Bickham.

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CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR A POLITICAL "STRIKE" BY LOYALISTS IN
NORTHERN IRELAND OVER AN ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT

1. The idea of an Anglo-Irish agreement is disturbing to the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland, and Loyalist minds are already turning to means of thwarting it. There can of course be no question of the Government resiling from an announced agreement in the face of such threats: it cannot be brought down as was the Northern Ireland Executive by the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) strike in 1974. Nevertheless, as the prospect of an agreement looms closer, tensions will rise and we must be prepared with measures likely to reduce the likelihood or effectiveness of any action which Loyalist leaders may seek to take. We must plan in particular for the fullest public presentation of the agreement, so as to spoke the guns of the instant commentators who will otherwise help to inflame the community with their own versions of the facts.

2. This paper aims to give an overview of what may confront the Government, and how it should be dealt with. It does not attempt to assess the precise likelihood of the threat - nor the probability of diversionary activity by PIRA/Sinn Fein, who have no interest in an agreement. These are being, and will continue to be, separately assessed.

3. There is a range of possible forms which Loyalist reaction could take, singly or in combination. At one extreme is outright terrorism on a concerted scale. Next is widespread and prolonged street violence. Short of those, there are (in descending order of probable seriousness) the possibilities of:

- a. industrial action of indefinite duration - backed up by intensive picketing - such as was carried out in 1974 and attempted unsuccessfully in 1977;
- b. mass demonstrations which are not intentionally violent: marches on Stormont, torchlight rallies, tractor blockades etc. There have been flurries of such activity on several occasions, and threats of it more frequently;

- c. boycotts of public bodies; other withdrawal of co-operation; civil defiance such as refusal to pay rent and rates;
- d. industrial stoppages limited to one or two days. One-day stoppages marked the period just before the collapse of the Stormont Government in 1972, and Mr Paisley was threatening two-day strikes after the failure of the United Ulster Action Council in 1977. He had very limited success with a similarly conceived 'Day of Action' after the assassination of Robert Bradford MP in 1981.

4. Ulster Unionists are already simmering over the advent of 39 Sinn Fein members to District Councils in the May elections, and the RUC's more restrictive policy towards Orange marches through minority areas. But it is the "Irish dimension" which most inflames the Loyalist spirit - and gave the crucial impetus to the UWC action in 1974. We ought accordingly to be prepared for a protest towards the upper end of the spectrum - though Loyalists themselves perceive 1977 as a defeat, and will avoid imitating it. Naturally the response will need to be attuned sensitively to what actually happens. Over-reaction merely provokes, and even a fairly widespread one-or two-day stoppage would scarcely begin to affect the services essential to life; it could therefore be weathered calmly, with a low-profile response on the ground. It is the protracted action, aimed not just at protest but at compelling a change of Government course, which calls on the fullest resources in response.

5. The essence of successful opposition to strike action of this kind is adequate preparation of plans beforehand; ability of Government and the forces of law and order to respond quickly and flexibly; and maintenance of the initiative at all times with the public through the media. The strike leaders' aim is to bring the Province to a standstill, so as to demonstrate that it can be made ungovernable without Loyalist acquiescence; the unconverted are to be persuaded by rumour and intimidation. Our task is to scotch the rumours, stamp on the intimidation, and convince the public that the strike is not going to succeed, and that the policy under protest is not in fact disastrous for Unionists. This

aggressive, positive approach is what characterised the 1977 episode, by contrast with 1974. On the latter occasion, besides, the power-sharing Executive was already beginning to split, and ripe to be brought down (an attainable objective); and there was virtually no prior planning or co-ordinated command and control, and thus no cohesion of response between Government, security forces and other agencies such as the electricity service. In 1977 those lessons had been learnt, and the public relations initiative was grasped some days before the strike was started, and held thenceforth. We can establish similar conditions if need be today, and many external factors favour us. Less helpful may be the time of year; 1974 and 1977 were both May stoppages, whereas as winter approaches there is less of a safety margin in the electricity supply and in the other services which depend on electricity or oil.

6. While the Government's response must, like the strike itself, be primarily political, concrete plans must also be ready to withstand penetration of the strike in various critical areas. The vital services most likely to be threatened are the electricity supply, fuel and oil supplies, water and sewage services, the docks (for food and animal foodstuffs) and perhaps the fire service. MACM (Military Aid to Civil Ministries) plans are prepared in these areas, to bring in suitably skilled members of the armed forces to take over jobs vacated by strikers. Significant lead times are built in, to permit the calling in of servicemen from many units. These plans are a necessary weapon in our armoury, but their activation, beyond the collection of the servicemen in Northern Ireland, is anything but a straightforward answer to a stoppage on the part of, say, power station workers or fuel tanker drivers. In the more sophisticated industries, servicemen simply lack the skills to take over jobs, unless at worst the supervisory and managerial grades remain at work. But the intrusion of the military may well be the last straw for these grades if they are already vacillating (as well as perhaps causing outgoing workers to sabotage plant). The recruitment of suitable workers from Great Britain, if they were willing to risk co-operation in the turbulent conditions that would prevail, might be subject to the same obstacles; certainly it could not be expected without the full approval of the local supervisory grades and of the Trade Unions concerned. More broadly, use of servicemen in any one

industry would be apt to prove an inflammatory act in other industries, where other workers would be encouraged to down tools. MACM should be regarded like the nuclear weapon; it is there, but for the purpose of not being used.

7. The power stations and fuel supplies are probably the most critical sectors - the first for obvious reasons, the second because if petrol is not freely available at service stations, workers will largely give up the effort of getting to work, which will do the strike leaders' job for them. The MACM plan in this area can only provide for priority car users and a few service stations, which will keep the country going but will not serve the wider political purpose. Prison Officers also need most careful watching, because a stoppage on their part would place the largest direct call on already overstretched security forces. The present position in these sectors is dealt with in the annex to this paper.

8. Given that mechanical responses are inadequate, and may be seen as a confession of failure, we are thrown back largely on other methods. First, the police must be deployed in force to ensure that those who want to get to work are not prevented or even discouraged from doing so. Barriers must be cleared immediately and threatening crowds prevented from gathering at exits from estates etc. The police must be ready to visit individual workers in critical jobs (power stations again) to offer convincing assurance, if they are being intimidated, that they will not suffer during or after for continuing at work. This is truly small-scale: maybe a couple of dozen in a large power station; or 200 or more overall. Action may also need to be taken with British Telecom to deal with threatening phone calls. The very heavy police deployment will probably require us to ask the Ministry of Defence to deploy the Spearhead battalion (perhaps more than one) to Northern Ireland, to take over patrolling duties normally carried out by the RUC mobile support units. A general UDR call-out may be desirable, on precautionary grounds as much as operationally. These military deployments are themselves moves in the game, to be timed with care.

9. The RUC itself has a key role, both in the maintenance of

order and in the example that it must set, as a force known to be generally sympathetic to Unionism, in showing disciplined loyalty to the rule of law. While the Police Federation has at times shown maverick leadership tendencies, we are confident that the force will stand firm and respond to whatever calls are made on it. We should ensure that the Chief Constable takes pains to explain to the force exactly what is at stake. At a different level, these remarks also apply to the UDR (which might expect to suffer a number of individual resignations).

10. Most important of all, Government must take a grip on public relations the moment the strike leaders announce their intention (which must perforce be some days before the strike can be mounted), and must then retain the initiative. The public must be brought to believe that the Government has no intention of giving in, and its policy on whatever is the pretext for the strike must be explained in the most sympathetic and unthreatening way. The Government must have the resources to let the public know, several times a day, how few people are responding to the strikers' call, and how many are continuing to go about their work. Ministers and officials must be ready at all times to talk to responsible representatives of critical industries, political leaders etc, in order to keep particular industries and services on course.

11. Some elaborate machinery is needed to maintain this effort. The NIO operations room, which has links with Northern Ireland Departments, security forces and essential services, can be kept open twenty four hours a day for the collection and dissemination of information around the official machine. The emergency committee, which includes the essential departments and the security forces at a senior level, will meet early every morning to determine tactics and necessary action at sensitive pressure points. The PR line will also be decided early each day.

12. It will of course be for the Secretary of State himself to judge how to divide his time between London and Belfast during the stoppage. The need to keep Cabinet and Parliament informed at frequent intervals may make some absences from the Province unavoidable. But it will be very important to keep them to the minimum, as there is no complete substitute for the Secretary of

State himself being available in Northern Ireland to put his weight behind the exposition of Government policy, and of the facts, throughout the stoppage. That said, he may see advantage in designating one Minister to act as spokesman whenever he is not available to be.

13. The actual course of events must depend to some extent on factors which cannot be gauged in advance (and which will themselves be influenced by the Government's posture at the time) eg whether all Unionist leaders subscribe to the strike or only Mr Paisley's party, and whether the Loyalist paramilitary leaders decide to lend physical, or perhaps only moral, backing to the endeavour. But the outcome can also be significantly influenced, regardless of any of these factors, by the Government's own posture, actual and perceived. We shall be disposing ourselves to make the most of this principle.

ELECTRICITY GENERATING

The organisers of previous loyalist stoppages have clearly judged that cutting electricity supplies is the way to make the most immediate and widespread impact on the life of the Province: not only because of the direct effect on domestic and industrial consumers, but also indirectly through the dependence of the water and sewage services on electrical pumping. They have sought to take full advantage of the fact that some of the main power stations are located in staunchly loyalist areas.

2. The total demand for power obviously varies according to the time of year; in September it is around 800-900 mw. Ballylumford power station at Larne, which alone has a generating capacity of 960 mw, remains the key - even following the more recent addition of the Kilroot Station. In the past, an extremist element has been prominent in the Ballylumford workforce, but in recent years discreet steps have been taken to move known extremists away from particularly sensitive jobs. In 1977 we were able to keep Ballylumford operating despite some attempts at intimidation by the Loyalist paramilitaries. The Kilroot workforce does not so far appear to have been permeated by extremists. (But Kilroot and Coolkeeragh together could only generate some 500-600 mw in the absence of Ballylumford and West Belfast, which also has a strongly Loyalist workforce.)

3. The NIES top management, with whom we keep in close touch, are rather less confident in 1985 than they would have been in 1984 of being able to persuade their employees to resist a call to stop work. Staff at all levels are reported to be in an edgy frame of mind about the possible impact on them of privatisation policies. The former Joint Staff Council, which played a helpful role in 1977, has collapsed as the result of an external efficiency study which recommended reductions in clerical staff without explaining candidly when and where they should be made: a new Council has been set up but has not had time to take root. Similarly, recent steps to rectify indifferent management at Ballylumford have not yet had time to take full effect.

4. Despite these uncertainties, there is cautious hope that

employees would be prepared to resist a call to stop work, unless intimidation became rife; and that, even then, most supervisory staff would remain at work, short of a wholesale loss of confidence in the Government. All this is of course on the assumption that any strike would in trade union terms remain unofficial.

5. The problems associated with bringing in Servicemen to maintain supplies would be particularly acute in the case of electricity generating. The complexity of modern power stations puts them beyond the ability of even fully trained service technicians to operate on their own; they could only be effective if supervisory staffs remained to oversee them. But the introduction of troops would be likely itself to precipitate the withdrawal of those staffs. (It might also anger the industrial workers sufficiently to cause them to damage machinery - an easy enough step to take - despite their normal pride in the plant that they operate).

6. In summary, therefore, the three weapons on which we should primarily rely to keep the power stations going would be close liaison between Government and the NIES top management; maximum recourse to such trust as already existed between management and workforce; and swift and effective police action against intimidation.

7. As a precautionary step, top management are now reviewing the maintenance schedules for this autumn - without making it obvious that this is being done - in order to reduce the risk of having a lot of plant out of commission at any one time.

OIL FUEL SUPPLIES

8. There are no industrial issues to aggravate the situation to the point of strike today. But the industry has been susceptible to politically motivated action in the past. Based as it is in East Belfast (the main depot and terminal being on Belfast harbour), the workforce is heavily Loyalist orientated and thus vulnerable to pressures to join in a politically inspired stoppage. It is an attractive target, given the effect of a fuel shortage on industrial activity. There are no identified "political" leaders within the workforce, but they must be expected to emerge when the time comes.

9. It is not to be supposed that the official Trade Unions (predominantly the ATGWU) would countenance a political stoppage, but a tussle for power could develop, and the authorities would need to find means to strengthen the position of the official Union leaders against their politically motivated opponents. It will be necessary to discuss tactics on this front, and more generally, with reliable oil company management well in advance of any likely stoppage developing.

10. Existing stocks at the pumps should last about a week and because of the short average home-to-work distance in Northern Ireland many people should be able to carry on for a further two weeks or more.

11. Should it be necessary to replace the tanker drivers with troops, under the plans provided, petrol could only be made available on a greatly reduced scale, and effectively for the essential services only. It would be limited to 21 distribution points, to be requisitioned (along with the tankers themselves), manned and supplied. The availability and suitability of these points will need to be reviewed, along with that of 18 Petrol Permit Centres. The Department of Economic Development will also review emergency legislation, arrangements for petrol vouchers and for staffing the emergency locations.

PRISON OFFICERS

12. It is just conceivable that the Prison Officers' Association might take advantage of a stoppage to further an industrial dispute of their own, calculating that with the security forces so completely deployed against the political action, the Government would have no choice but to concede their claims. If this happened, the difficulties of the RUC would indeed be vastly increased (upwards of 2,000 officers would be needed to cover a total shutdown) - to the extent that we should have to address the possibility (hitherto shunned) of putting soldiers into direct contact with prisoners.