

SP(B)364/413/03

Mr Lynn

A POLITICAL STRIKE: CONTINGENCY PLANS

... I am sorry the attached draft is only reaching you today.

2. In preparing the paper I drew heavily on my memory of events, verified where possible by papers on our files, and supplemented by various snippets of information circulating in this part of the NIO. I suspect I may not have provided enough data on our contingency plans, although personally I think a broad outline, plus an assurance that we are keeping our powder dry, should be sufficient at this stage.

3. This said, I will be happy to include any amendment or additions you may suggest, for I realise I am only an amateur in a world of emergency planning experts!

Christopher Maccabe.

C G MACCABE
Law and Order Division

6 April 1984

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cc: PS/Secretary of State (L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Sir Ewart Bell
Mr Brennan
Mr Buxton
Mr Angel
Mr Doyne-Ditmas
Mr Merifield
Mr Coulson
Mr McKillop

PS/Secretary of State (B)

A POLITICAL STRIKE: CONTINGENCY PLANS

Mr Lyon's minute of 27 March asked for a report on the possibility and extent of a politically motivated strike later this year, and on the contingency plans for meeting such an eventuality.

The threat

2. There have been signs that the DUP contemplate some sort of action should HMG's response to the Forum Report not be to their liking. For example, Peter Robinson's address at a DUP dinner in Omagh on 30 March included the warning:-

"If I discern the signs of the times, then the day is not long off when Ulster Loyalists will once more be called upon to demonstrate their rugged resolve and dogged determination If we willingly - or without defiance - continue to be led along this road (to joint sovereignty), then we are being led to our destruction."

However, apart from this political sabre rattling, nothing is known to suggest that general Loyalist plans are being made;

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but as experience has shown, direct action can quickly be mobilised if a sufficiently emotive issue arises.

3. It is an open question how much popular support there would be for a call for industrial, or even more unconstitutional, action: and the answer is almost totally dependent on the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community's perception of any situation which might develop. At one extreme, if, for example, HMG were to indicate a commitment to a withdrawal from Northern Ireland, or to a United Ireland, an immediate reaction on a massive scale, far in excess of the UWC strike of May 1974, could be expected. On the other hand, faced with only minor concessions such as a promise of greater cross-border co-operation, the 'not-an-inch' proponents in the DUP might try to drum up support for civil disobedience in one of its many forms, but with little success as in May 1977 during the DUP inspired UUAC strike. Or the answer could lie somewhere in between.

Types of action

4. Loyalist action could take one of a number of forms, or, more likely, a combination of them.

(i) Voluntary withdrawal of labour

Workers could strike, either spontaneously or in a co-ordinated way. Exactly how would depend on the strength of feeling in the community; the attitude of the

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various political parties and organisations, the churches, and the trade unions; and the degree of co-ordination the strike organisers could manage to achieve.

(ii) Involuntary withdrawal of labour

This would occur if workers were prevented from going to work through picketing of their places of work, disruption of the transport system, or intimidation. It would be exacerbated if managements decided to close their premises, either through fear, or sympathy for the cause.

(iii) Parades and demonstrations

Any industrial action would almost certainly be supplemented by the customary forms of protest. Depending on the public mood, they could range from peaceful meetings and processions to severe rioting, and could take place anywhere in the Province with a significance Protestant population.

(iv) 'Third Force' activity

In its early stages this would most likely take the form of quasi-military shows of strength and the organisation of 'local defence forces', but it would probably not be long before it degenerated into strong-arm intimidatory tactics and outright violence occurred. In any major confrontation it is likely the UDA and UVF would play a part.

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(v) Terrorist activity

Here again the seriousness of the situation would be the main determinant, but even relatively minor disruption might be used as cover, or an excuse, for opportunistic 'pre-emptive' attacks against 'known Republicans'. Traditionally, Republican terrorist groups have been relatively dormant during periods of Loyalist disruption, but there can be no certainty of this and PIRA and INLA would undoubtedly retaliate (probably with relish) if attacks were made on Catholic areas or individuals.

HMG's response

5. Responsibility for co-ordinating the Government's response in the run-up to, and during, civil emergencies, including political strikes, lies with the NI Emergency Committee which has contingency plans for maintaining essential services, and is the body which would gather and assess intelligence about happenings on the ground. It would also be the primary channel of communication to and from Ministers.

6. The level of chairmanship of the NIEC will depend on a number of factors, but at the highest level Heads of NI Departments would meet under my chairmanship. At the second tier the chair would be taken by Mr Buxton, Mr Coulson or Mr McKillop.

7. It is generally agreed there are 4 areas which are particularly susceptible to interference and which would quickly have an adverse effect on the normal life of the Province

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if they were so interfered with. They are:-

- (a) electrical power supply;
- (b) petrol distribution;
- (c) water and sewage;
- (d) the maintenance of free passage on the roads, including access to sectarian estates.

The detailed plans in respect of (a), (b) and (c) - and the plans for other essential services such as petrol, gas, agricultural feeding stuffs and hospital services - are currently being reviewed and (d) is dealt with below.

8. In a situation of the kind envisaged, responsibility for the maintenance of law and order would, of course, rest with the Chief Constable. The RUC have detailed plans for dealing with large scale public disorder, and these were tested to an extent during the 1981 Hunger Strike and have been refined since. The plans provide, inter alia, for resolute action against groups of intimidators, and for certain designated routes throughout the Province to be kept open at all times.

9. The Army also have operational plans which include rapid reinforcement by Spearhead troops and the introduction of specialist operatives to help with essential services such as electricity, water, and fire fighting. It is not envisaged that the Army would act independently, but only in aid, and at the request, of the police or civil authorities. This assistance would be called for through the MACM machinery in the usual way.

10. There is no reason to believe that the part-time members

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of the RUC Reserve and UDR would behave any differently than their full-time colleagues. Indeed in 1974 and 1977 their response, when asked to perform additional duties, was overwhelming.

11. Contingency plans also exist for running the Courts and Prison Services, but both rely heavily on the deployment of police manpower and, depending on the circumstances, could stretch RUC resources to the limit and beyond.

The media

12. In 1974 the media gave wide coverage to the strikers' case because they had very little from Government to publish or broadcast. But in 1977 Government took a very much more resolute stand against the strike, and were therefore able to flood the media with information, statements and on-the-record interviews to support the contention that a great deal was being done to keep roads open, industry functioning, and power stations in operation.

13. In 1977 a small planning unit, headed by PUS, met every morning at 8.00 am to anticipate the day's events and to work out a strategy for dealing with them publicly. This was followed by a meeting with the Secretary of State at 9.00 am at which the strategy and tactics were approved and the necessary arrangements for dealing with the media made.

14. A 24-hour a day press office, which sought to dominate the early morning news bulletins with reassurance that roads were open, industry was functioning and that intimidation was being

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prevented was operated, and while this was not necessarily always true, it created an air of confidence which was totally missing in 1974.

15. It is possible that protestors may attempt to control or disrupt the dissemination of information by the media. They could well be successful as regards newspapers, but it is unlikely that they would have any real impact on radio and television because, even if these could not operate from local studios, signals could be transmitted from GB through NI transmitters on secure sites. A problem in this area could arise if there was a failure in the electricity supply, but even this would be limited as nowadays almost everyone has at least one battery radio.

Conclusion

16. Without a clear indication of the sort of protest action we might have to face our response can only be defined in general terms. Nevertheless, I am satisfied that our contingency planning, and that of associated agencies, would allow us to approach any situation with an air of confidence.

J B BOURN

April 1984

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