

PRIME MINISTERFORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

You will want to be aware of the attached exchange between the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Defence Secretary.

Tom King puts in a plea for extending the two reinforcement battalions currently in Northern Ireland. His main argument is that the level of IRA activity remains high, as does the threat to public order from Loyalist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Defence Secretary contends that the overall security position is not significantly worse than a year ago, indeed the number of attacks on the security forces is down, and the level of serious trouble from the Unionists has fallen short of our worst fears. He is prepared to maintain the present forces level until we have got past the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in October. But he wants to withdraw the first additional battalion in early December and the second in February 1987.

I do not think that you need intervene at this stage, although the Northern Ireland Secretary is likely to seek your support for extending the additional battalions in due course. Personally I have some sympathy with the Defence Secretary's argument. There is an understandable tendency to over-insure in Northern Ireland and to award it too high a share of resources generally. A decision to reduce forces levels in some months time could also be useful politically as a sign that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is slowly becoming accepted.

We can safely let the correspondence run another round, unless there are any particular views you wish me to put in at this stage.

CDP
CHARLES POWELL
28 July 1986
CJ2ACJ

If the period is extended it
does look like becoming an
operational commitment - & therefore
sympathetic with MOD.
not