

STATE PAPERS

Mackies jobs fears raised

THE question of Catholic employment at Mackies engineering plant in west Belfast was raised by the Irish government in 1986. It was raised at the Intergovernmental Conference established under the Anglo-Irish Agreement, according to newly released state papers.

Ronnie Spence of Stormont's Central Secretariat wrote to colleague David Fell on January 23, 1986.

He asked "what they might say to the Irish" about reports that Mackies was considering closing their main factory on the Springfield Road and relocating to the Shankill-Woodvale area.

"The implication behind the Irish request was that such relocation might result in a reduction of job opportunities for Catholics," he said. Spence noted that Mackies had recently laid off 400 of its 1,400 workforce due to trading difficulties and needed to review its operation.

He told Fell: "In advising the Irish we can say that Mackies' workforce currently includes 20 per cent to 30 per cent Catholics" and that everyone involved was aware "that relocation might be perceived by the Catholic workforce as being to their disadvantage".

Shorts difficulties revealed in tetchy 1988 exchanges

THE theft of a simulated missile-aiming unit by armed men from the north's largest industrial employer sparked concern among Northern Ireland Office officials.

The device, used for missile system training, was stolen from Shorts Brothers Aerospace's Castlereagh factory.

Declassified papers from November 1988 show that Peter Viggers, industry minister at the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), voiced concern over the theft. Shorts' managing director Roy McNulty informed the minister that the device was used to provide training in the use of the Javelin missile system. Files released by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) under the 20/30 Year Rule also reveal business difficulties facing Shorts, including disappointing productivity and the problems over its privatisation.

At the time the company announced that it had secured a \$60 million contract with the US Army National Guard for the

MEMO: Tom King who was secretary of state between 1985 and 1989



supply of Super Sherpa aircraft. But in November 1988 McNulty informed secretary of state Tom King that due to strained relations between the UK and Kuwait, negotiations on the sale of Tucano aircraft to the Kuwait Air Force had been suspended. Fearing that the contract "may well go to our competitors", McNulty asked King to urge the Foreign and Colonial Office "to do what they could to improve the political climate for a successful negotiation of the contract".

Meanwhile, the British government's determination to privatise the company was opposed by all political parties

in Northern Ireland.

The crisis facing Shorts was discussed at a meeting involving company chairman Rodney Lund and McNulty at Stormont House in December 1988.

The secretary of state stressed the importance of both the government and the company working together towards privatisation.

In a later memo for ministers, King said he was seeking offers for the company as a whole and not for individual parts, though it was uncertain if this could be achieved.

The secretary of state added: "I have told the chairman that the

government will not provide any support for a new aircraft project while the company remains in public ownership."

Total bank borrowings at October 1988 amounted to £336m but, King told cabinet colleagues, "no purchaser will be prepared to take on this level of debt".

He therefore recommended a capital injection of £300m.

King's blunt language to Shorts' management struck home.

In November 1988 Lund wrote him a sharp letter saying that "the damage to the privatisation process was done last July when Shorts was placed in the 'lame duck' category".

Lund the secretary of state that "Shorts is no dinosaur" and "is at the frontier of design, innovation and technology in all three of its businesses".

He concluded: "Although Shorts is smaller, its relevance in employment terms to the province is equivalent to that in Britain of British Coal or Rolls Royce."

Shorts PLC was sold to Bombardier in June 1989.

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