Did the secret computer exist?

DUNCAN CAMPBELL investigates the army in Ulster

REPORTS OF a massive computer in Ulster with files on most of the population may be a government inspired myth, according to official intelligence documents obtained and published in an Irish newspaper. The Dublin *Sunday Tribune* has just published a series of articles based on the documents, of which we have copies.

As early as 1974, reports started appearing in the *Times* and other major British newspapers about computer files in Ulster, so detailed that information on the colour and style of domestic furniture was instantly available. In 1978, when the Labour government procured a new computer for the job, a secrecy screen was maintained, even about the model of computer bought. The House of Commons was told by Harold Wilson that it would computerise existing records. However a MoD spokesman explained that this meant 'suspects, weapons, incidents and vehicles'.

It now appears that no such computer existed, then or now, and that the previous operation had been highly unsuccessful. Extensive details of army intelligence procedures are given in the document, the 'Northern Ireland — Intelligence Environment', from the Army's Ashford Intelligence Centre.

The computer system is, and always has been, restricted to vehicles, and is called Operation Vengeful. There are 50 Vengeful terminals in Northern Ireland including border and other permanent checkpoints. Some checkpoints are concealed, and the numbers of vehicles passing are watched on television. But there are no computer records on anything other than vehicles.

The first part of Vengeful was in operation by 1974, when every vehicle registered in the North was put onto computer, as happens in Britain with the Police National Computer. But this was, according to a former Army commander in Ulster, a 'disaster'. No useful leads were obtained in the 18 months he experienced on Vengeful, and a great deal of time was wasted taking and passing information about completely innocent vehicles.

The new computer system in Ulster is in fact very small, incorporating only information on *suspect* vehicles. It is likely to be more successful than its predecessor. But information about people, houses, and so on remains on manual card indexes, which have now been in operation for 11 years. A special version of the card system for Irish country areas is codenamed 'Farmer's Daughter'.

The documents also identify the way in which the military and RUC Special Branch have become completely integrated. A Special Military Intelligence Unit has plain clothes military officers and NCOs in every Special Branch office. All intelligence gathering in the north is co-ordinated and directed by a director of Intelligence from either MI5 or MI6. This official now answers to the new Ulster Security Co-ordinator, Sir Francis Brooks Richards.