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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



W.C. Press Note

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Michael Alexander Esq
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28 October 1980

Dear Michael,

DISCLOSURE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION ON PRISON CLOTHING
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

You asked for a report on the circumstances which enabled the press to report at 1.00 pm on Thursday 23 October the decision taken at Cabinet that day about prison clothing.

... I enclose a summary of the sequence of events. There are a few points which I should emphasise by way of commentary. First, there was no "leak" as such. Nobody provided information to the press surreptitiously for improper reasons, and your own Press Office were kept fully informed about the actions which our people were taking. Second, the Secretary of State had previously considered the risk that Cardinal O Fiaich, who was flying from Rome to see the Secretary of State, would try to take the credit for any moves the Cabinet decided to make. None of us could have foreseen how acutely that risk would arise because - third - our Press Office was tackled during the morning by Billy Flackes of the BBC who may have been alerted to the issue by exchanges at the Lobby briefing and who made quite clear that he knew, apparently from Church sources, of the Cardinal's visit. He also knew from the Cardinal's statements some weeks ago that the question of prison clothing had been raised with the Secretary of State.

It must be a matter of judgment whether it was right to take such urgent action to ensure that the Government got the credit for its own decision. Those of us at the meeting with the Cardinal that afternoon have a vivid recollection of his and Bishop Daly's disappointment at not being able to steal the show. You yourself have recorded the Irish Ambassador's reaction, which led his Government to exert pressure on the Cardinal without which he might have reacted even more unhelpfully. We believe the established fact that the Government volunteered a conciliatory gesture will be of continuing value in the difficult situation which the hunger strike will create, particularly in respect of our standing abroad.

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We believe that this limited change in the regime would have created appalling difficulties on the Unionist side if it had appeared to be made at the behest of the Cardinal.

The more cautious approach would, of course, have been to wait until the Secretary of State had been consulted before acting. That would have been well after 1.15 pm. Officials could properly have been criticised if they had done so and left the BBC (and in consequence that afternoon's Belfast Telegraph) to lead with well-informed speculation that the Cardinal's dash to London had wrung out of the Government a concession on clothing.

My Secretary of State has considered the matter in the light of this report. His conclusion is that officials were right to take action to ensure that the Cardinal could not claim the credit for the Cabinet's decision. Speedy decisions had to be made in circumstances when he himself could not be contacted and he believes they were right to use their initiative.

I am sending a copy of this letter to David Wright (Cabinet Office) and Richard Prescott (Paymaster General's Office).

Yours sincerely,
R A Harrington
R A HARRINGTON

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DISCLOSURE OF GOVERNMENT'S DECISION
ON NORTHERN IRELAND PRISONS

The sequence of events was as follows:-

1. On Wednesday evening No. 10 Duty Press Officer phoned NIO Duty Press Officer to say that RTE, the Dublin broadcasting organisation, had sought confirmation of a story that Cabinet would be discussing the threatened MAZE hunger strike next day. No. 10 were refuting this story.

2. Thursday's GUARDIAN had a piece by Julia Langdon headed "Cabinet taking firm line on Maze threat" which indicated that the subject "is to be discussed at a Cabinet committee meeting today" (copy attached).

...

3. Before 11 am Lobby briefing the NIO (being aware of (1) and (2)) suggested to No. 10 that since there would be an official Government statement geared to the hunger strike later in the day, and since it would be essential to establish that the Secretary of State had the full backing of Cabinet for his decision (whatever it might be) it was neither accurate nor wise to deny that something was being discussed and would be announced later if questions arose at Lobby. No. 10 Press Office later reported that questions had been asked and a hint given that the subject might be dealt with. Questioned about a statement being made, No. 10 Press Office said that one was unlikely that day. The possibility later when the Commons resumed was left vague.

4. Presumably as a result of speculation that the subject would be discussed at Cabinet, NIO Press Office got inquiries from the two leading NI Political Correspondents, Desmond McCartan (Belfast Telegraph) and W.D. Flackes (BBC) probing for what might be coming out as a result of Cabinet. Initially, no information whatever was given to them.

5. Flackes then inquired about Cardinal O'Fiaich seeing the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. He clearly knew that a meeting had been arranged - information which could only have

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come from a non-NIO source - probably an ecclesiastical one. Flackes was clearly going to run a prominent story on his main lunchtime radio bulletin, which would with the statement coming out later have the effect of establishing the Cardinal not the Cabinet as the central figure in any decision.

6. It was regarded as essential that the Cardinal should not be able to claim credit for the move on prison clothing. It was explained to No. 10 Press Office that a more explicit hint was being given to Messrs. Flackes and McCartan once the Cabinet decision had been taken. The aim was to establish clearly in Northern Ireland in advance of the Cardinal's meeting with the Secretary of State that the Government had decided to make a change on prison uniform generally in Northern Ireland and would be making a formal announcement later in the day.

7. What then happened was that BBC London latched on to the story through its man in Belfast. This led to the inquiry from Noel Lewis (BBC London Political Correspondent) to No. 10 Press Office which offered no guidance on the Cabinet discussion on NI Prisons. The BBC subsequently carried the story on the lunchtime national radio news based on what had been said to Flackes and what he, with his close knowledge of the whole H-Blocks situation, had added in to build up the story.

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