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Hunger Strike

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From the Private Secretary

27 May, 1981

Dear Stephen,

Northern Ireland

As you know the Prime Minister held a meeting at Chequers yesterday evening with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to discuss the present situation in the Province. Sir Kenneth Stowe, General Sir Richard Lawson, Mr Jack Hermon and Mr Ranson were also present.

In response to the Prime Minister's invitation, Mr Hermon said that the situation in Northern Ireland had been developing rather rapidly since mid-April. Prior to that the security forces had succeeded in stabilising the situation. However following the deaths of the four hunger strikers there was a growing tendency for the Catholic community to display sympathy for the 'martyrs'. The Catholics were also becoming alienated from Government policy. There was little sympathy for the PIRA as such and no pressure for the granting of political status or the five demands. But the continuing violence and the activities of Dr Paisley were giving rise to unease and dissatisfaction. There was increasing support amongst the young for the PIRA. PIRA intimidation was becoming more effective, as could be seen from what had happened to Messrs Fitt and Devlin. The police were being forced to abandon foot patrols and to remain in their vehicles. In sum, there was some doubt as to whether the level of security achieved in the recent past could be maintained and a risk that some of the ground won, e.g. in terms of the Catholic community's confidence in the security forces, would be lost. If the Government could dispel the impression of inflexibility and could get over instead that its policy was magnanimous and caring, these risks might be reduced.

General Lawson supported Mr Hermon. He said that the security threat could be contained. Neither the riots nor the scale of terrorist activity were as substantial as in the past. The Government was in no danger of defeat. None-the-less the population were becoming alienated. The PIRA had succeeded in obscuring the fact that they were responsible for the present troubles. The Catholics were looking to HMG for movement of some kind.

/Mr Ranson said

SECRET

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Mr Ranson said that the PIRA recognised they could not win through terrorism. Their thinking was concentrated on the need to find a way to win back the support of the Catholic community which they had lost in recent years. They saw the hunger strike, about the launching of which they had had grave doubts, as a way to drive a wedge between the Catholic community and the Government. They knew that the situation was delicately balanced and that their effort might already have "peaked" in PR terms. There might be an opportunity in the next few weeks for the Government to attempt to reassure the Catholic community.

The Prime Minister asked whether there were any specific proposals aimed at securing the objective which had been outlined. It was not easy to envisage a proposal which would be substantial enough to satisfy the Catholic community, and more particularly the hunger strikers, while being sufficiently limited in scope to avoid alarming the Protestants. Mr Herman said that the precedent of the Bennett Enquiry might be helpful. He believed that there would be value in setting up a similarly expert enquiry to investigate prison conditions in Northern Ireland. Its point of departure would be Section 7 of the Prisons Act, 1953. The enquiry might be tasked to consider whether the types of crime, the motives of the criminal and the purpose of imprisonment in Northern Ireland were the same as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. The terms of reference would include no promise of change in prison conditions, nor indeed any acknowledgement of a need for change. A principal objective of setting up the enquiry would be to remove the question of prison conditions from the political arena.

Sir Kenneth Stowe pointed out that the need for an investigation into prison conditions in Northern Ireland had been apparent for some months. He had, for instance, been struck by the absence of specialised psychiatric and psychological advice. There were no penologists in Northern Ireland. The gulf which divided the Protestant prison officers from the largely Catholic prison population was a problem peculiar to Northern Ireland: it had been largely responsible for the breakdown of the situation in the Maze in the weeks after the collapse of the first hunger strike. If it was agreed that there was a case for an initiative on prison conditions, the next four weeks i.e. before the next hunger striker was expected to die, might be the time to launch it.

In subsequent discussion it was confirmed that an enquiry of the kind proposed would cover all prisons and prisoners in Northern Ireland. It was recognised that if the idea were to be pursued it would need to be worked out in considerable detail and would have to be considered by Ministers. Clearly the enquiry could not be mandated to enquire into the five demands or to consider the question of special status for the hunger strikers. But any enquiry would be forced to deal with the question of existing special category prisoners.

It was argued that, even if it was agreed to launch an enquiry into prison conditions, this would not of itself reverse the present trend towards alienation of the Catholic community. A sustained effort, which would have to involve the Prime Minister herself, would be required. It would have to continue for some weeks. This would, in effect, be a major hearts and minds campaign aimed at the Catholic community.

/In a discussion

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SECRET

- 3 -

In a discussion of the timing of any initiative, it was suggested that the PIRA would be trying in the days and weeks immediately ahead to intensify the street rioting and to raise the level of terrorist activity. They would also engage in more specifically political activity with the objective of broadening their support in the Catholic community and, perhaps above all, of capitalising on the forthcoming election in the Republic. They could also be expected to renew their efforts to move a writ for a further by-election in Fermanagh. All this suggested that the Government, if it were to take any kind of initiative, should move sooner rather than later.

The Prime Minister said that the Government must be 'rock solid' against any concessions to the hunger strikers or PIRA. She doubted whether the answer to the present situation could be as simple as a statement by her or an announcement of an enquiry into prison conditions. However she agreed that the suggestion of an enquiry into prison conditions should be analysed further. She also agreed that a gesture towards the Catholic community should be made and that it should be made by her in Northern Ireland. If she were to come to Belfast, her visit must have a purpose and should encompass a meeting with religious leaders. She would be prepared, if necessary, to come in the very near future and to make a statement or be interviewed on TV while there. She asked, therefore, that urgent consideration should be given to the timing of her visit and to the programme for that visit.

As you know it was subsequently agreed that the visit should take place tomorrow, 28 May.

I am sending copies of this letter to Roderic Lyne (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), John Halliday (Home Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely

Michael Alexander