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Ref. A05101

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland: Political Development and the Prison Situation

(OD(81) 32 and 33)

BACKGROUND

Since OD discussed political development in Northern Ireland on 18th November 1980 the main events have been the collapse of the initial hunger strike in the Maze; the Dublin Summit and the start of the Anglo-Irish joint studies; the second hunger strike; the Fermanagh by-election; the rioting following the four strikers' deaths; the local government elections in the Province; and the general election in the Republic. The immediate background to the two memoranda which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has now circulated are the discussions which you recently had with the GOC and Chief Constable Northern Ireland at Chequers. They are worried that without some modification of the Government's present stance (to show that the Government is not indifferent to the deaths of the hunger strikers) there is a danger of progressive alienation of moderate Catholic opinion. The converse of this is that a modification of the present stance, at any rate while the succession of hunger strikes continues, could be interpreted by the Protestants as a "surrender" to the PIRA and could inflame Protestant opinion.

2. There has been no significant deterioration in the security situation so far as the general level of terrorist incidents is concerned. The security forces do not doubt that they can contain the terrorists. But they are concerned that the hunger strike deaths are now associated with street violence, which is no doubt well orchestrated but involves people well beyond the hard core of terrorists; they are apprehensive about the reappearance of "no-go" areas in Belfast; and the image of renewed street violence is damaging the prospects of economic recovery for Northern Ireland. If the street violence continues, there is a possibility of the security forces being goaded beyond endurance and

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becoming involved in another "bloody Sunday" type of incident, which would alienate international opinion particularly in the Republic of Ireland and the United States.

3. The difficulties will increase when, as seems likely, a regular series of strikers' deaths begin to take place every 10-14 days, starting early next month and continuing into the indefinite future. In the Irish election the H Block candidates did better than anyone had predicted, polling over 42,000 first preference votes and getting two members elected in Border constituencies. This suggests that the Fermanagh by-election was not a passing phenomenon.

4. In his minute to you of 12th June, which has been circulated to the Committee, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland explains the link between the prison situation and the question of a more general political initiative. Essentially his view is that there must be a move in both areas in parallel for there to be any chance of success for either.

5. The questions posed by Mr. Atkins's two memoranda present an acutely difficult balance of political judgment. Either way, a little bad luck could bring us on to a slippery downhill slope in relation to our entire policy towards Northern Ireland. Progress down this slope might be accelerated by further hunger strike deaths, and a growing "troops out" movement in this country. But it could also be accelerated (if the Chief Constable and the GOC are right) by the lack of any modification in the Government's stance. If we get the balance wrong, we might be forced into thinking in very different terms from the limited sorts of initiative now under discussion.

6. Ministers must take seriously the view of the Chief Constable and the GOC that the setting up of a Departmental Committee on the prison system would reassure the Catholics of the Government's sense of concern, and would thus ease the burden of maintaining law and order. But it would probably enrage the Protestants; it would be seen by them and by the PIRA as a sign of weakness, and it seems unlikely that it would persuade the hunger strikers to give up, even if it did not actually strengthen their belief that they were winning. It could all too easily be seen as a move towards arbitration and thus as a sign of the Government losing political control.

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7. As regards political progress, Mr. Atkins's proposal for an elected advisory body has been under consideration for a long time. The Committee discussed and rejected it in 1979. It might be welcome initially to international opinion, as an indication of political movement. But in Northern Ireland it could be a damp squib; and it could end all too easily as a "talking shop" which would be a source of damaging criticism of Government policy but would not accept any responsibility for constructive action.

8. In judging the balance between action and inaction, the essential criterion must be the need not to jeopardise the very real assets which we still retain. The improvement in the general security situation has been maintained. In the Irish election, although the H Block candidates may have done well in the Border areas, the overall result was certainly not a victory for the extreme Republicans. It is significant that Sile De Valera lost her seat in Dublin South. Much of international opinion has been broadly sympathetic to British policy. Other countries have similar problems, and the West Germans for example let their Baader-Meinhof hunger striker die. The Anglo-Irish joint studies remain a useful link with Dublin which both Mr. Haughey and Dr. FitzGerald are anxious to preserve.

9. I find it difficult to believe that this is the right time for launching a proposal for a Departmental Committee in the prison system. If that view were to be accepted, then the question would be whether we could sit still and do nothing - at least until the autumn - and whether, if it is felt that some move must be made, the political initiative proposed is credible and sufficient on its own.

10. You will also wish to have at the back of your mind the possibility that you may wish to appoint a new Secretary of State before long. The appointment of a new Secretary of State would itself be an important political event and gesture in Northern Ireland. A new Secretary of State would need shots in his political locker; to launch a political initiative now would, to put it at its lowest, diminish his options.

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11. The Secretary of State for Scotland and the Attorney General have been invited for this item.

HANDLING

12. You will wish to invite the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to introduce his two memoranda. You may like to suggest that the Northern Irish prisons situation should be considered first, as a decision on this particular problem will affect the form and timing of any more general political initiative. Discussion should cover the following points -

- (a) Are the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Scotland content that the proposed terms of reference for the Departmental Committee to review the Northern Irish prison system would not produce awkward repercussions in relation to prisons in the rest of the United Kingdom? Home Office officials are worried by the suggestion that there should be "continuing provision of independent and professional advice on prison policy and practice".
- (b) Is it either desirable or practicable, while the hunger strike continues, to set up this kind of Departmental Committee, which would presumably include members outside Government service? Might the incidence of dying strikers place the Committee under an intolerable strain so far as the timetable of its work and the nature of its recommendations were concerned?
- (c) Would there be any advantage in announcing now that the Departmental Committee will be set up when the hunger strike is brought to an end, linking its creation to the need to consider various administrative problems before the new prison at Maghaberry is opened in 1982? This might go some way towards placating moderate Catholic opinion in Northern Ireland. It might also help to weaken the resolve of the hunger strikers, but it is difficult to set ~~too~~ much store by that.
- (d) Does the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary consider that an initiative on the prisons situation in Northern Ireland is likely to have much impact on international opinion, particularly in the United States? Or is it the political initiative which really matters in this context?

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- (e) Does the proposed political initiative offer enough to be worth pursuing? It was rejected by OD in 1979 as being too slight. Its chances of achieving any success are even more slender now, as they depend on achieving some kind of acceptance by the SDLP of the Government's policy on prisons. The main virtue of the proposal is that it would do something to fill in the current vacuum and indicate a willingness on the part of the Government not to stand still. But would the proposal offer sufficient prospect of progress to be taken seriously at Westminster, in Ireland, and abroad?
- (f) If any political initiative is to be made, what about timing? The renewal of powers debate in the House of Commons on 2nd July would be a good opportunity for an announcement. But soon after that hunger strikers are likely to start dying and the marching season in Northern Ireland will have begun. And Mr. Atkins does not envisage that his meetings with Northern Irish political parties will be completed until about September.
- (g) If there is to be a political initiative on these lines, is it right to start with bilateral discussions with the parties, or is there something to be said for going straight to an announcement of a decision to set up a consultative assembly and letting the talking follow?
- (h) What is the likelihood of the security situation in Northern Ireland deteriorating if the Government takes no initiative? Does the Secretary of State for Defence believe that the security forces will have difficulty in containing the street violence which is likely to take place? Is there likely to be any resurgence of terrorist incidents in the Border areas following the support which has been demonstrated for the H Block candidates?

#### CONCLUSION

13. Subject to the points made in discussion, you may wish to guide the Committee to the conclusion that the initiatives proposed in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's memoranda both in relation to the prisons situation

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and the general political situation offer insufficient promise of immediate benefit to justify their introduction at this particular time and the associated risk of worsening matters. This applies particularly to the prisons proposal. The Committee might conclude that the proposed talks with local political parties should go ahead, without any commitment at this stage to a Government proposal, but that the Government should stand firm in the prisons situation so long as the hunger strikes continue, while recognising that this may represent a bar to progress so far as talking to the SDLP is concerned.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

17th June, 1981

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