

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Prime Minister

This is the note which
is intended to serve as the
basis for the meeting at 1700

Clive Whitmore Esq today.
10 Downing Street
LONDON SW1

HW

26.5.81.

26 May 1981

Dear Clive,

HUNGER STRIKE

1. Over the last few weeks we have succeeded in our aim of getting across to people in the Province, including the Provisionals, the message that the Government cannot compromise on political status or the five demands. This has needed hard words, which have naturally not gone down easily with the Catholic community.

2. So far the security forces have been able to cope without too much difficulty: indeed, the trouble on the streets has been less than most people expected. Nevertheless, attitudes in the Catholic community have been changing as the hunger-strikers have died. I attach a note which sets out the changes, and their implications, with a complementary note about the Protestant community.

...

Yours,
S W Boys Smith

S W BOYS SMITH

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY

1. The paper on the prisons protest considered by Ministers on 20 May 1981 contained the following paragraph:

"For the Protestant community, HMG's handling of the prisons is seen as a measure of its resolve against the IRA. Concessions to Republican pressure would be interpreted as weakness and would have consequences for the security situation."

But the picture in the Protestant community is complex.

2. Unionist politicians are unanimous (though with differing degrees of vehemence) in protest against anything which suggests HMG may be in the process of making concessions of any sort to Republican prisoners above all under the pressure of a hunger strike, of international or Church opinion, or the Irish Government, or of a terrorist campaign. Every re-iteration of HMG's firm stance is music to their ears.

3. This general attitude, so far as we can judge from our contacts, is shared by the Protestant community as a whole. Even very moderate Protestants will insist on the necessity not to give in to the IRA: and they believe that the Provisionals, if HMG stands firm on this issue, will eventually capitulate. The Protestant community as a whole would, however, prefer to accept any changes in the present situation which resolved the prisons issue and its accompanying violence provided this was not tantamount to political status (or gave the prisoners control over how they spent their time) or seemed to be a charter for an eventual amnesty; and provided, above all that they resolved the issue. A touchstone of Protestant reaction would be their assessment of what weakness the Government had shown towards the Provisionals.

4. The UDA have come out publicly in favour of what they call special category status, distinguishing it from the Republicans' "political status". This has long been the UDA position - some of their own prisoners went on an abortive hunger strike before Christmas to achieve it, and they would not object to any concessions provided their prisoners benefitted. But in this attitude they are not representative of the Protestant community as a whole. Thus, while the UDA would not support political protest against concessions with either paramilitary or terrorist activity, they would of course feel bound to react if they thought the Provisionals had won a major confrontation with the Government; and might be drawn into violence through the reaction of the Protestant Community as a whole.

5. Other bodies representative in some ways of Protestant opinion and important in this context are the UDR, the RUC and the Prison Officers. The GOC and the ^{Chief Constable} / have already told the Secretary of ^{bodies} State that they would not expect the two former/to react adversely to movement forward under the ECHR (eg Article 28) procedure. Because of their close involvement in dealing with the prisons protest, prison officers are more sensitive to changes which could be interpreted as concessions to protestors. But subject to the provisos already outlined, some movement, for example under the ECHR, could be achieved without causing an unacceptable reaction from these quarters.

Conclusions

6. The Protestant Community's attention is presently focussed on the prisons and the hunger strike but its mood is dependent on issues going far wider. Its need remains much the same as identified last December; ie for reassurance that:-

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- a. the security situation is under control;
- b. HMG has made no plans in association with Mr Haughey
for radical moves in the political or institutional
field; and
- c. intends to stand firm on the position that while we
will continue to operate a humanitarian prisons regime
there is no question of concessions which would be
tantamount to political status.

Reaction in Republic.

Northern Ireland Office
26 May 1981

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NORTHERN IRELAND: THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

1. The present hunger strike evoked little interest at its outset in the Catholic community. Attitudes have been changing with the deaths of the hunger strikers. What is said below is true chiefly in West Belfast, but applies also in Londonderry and to a lesser but increasing extent in other parts of the Province: and applies to all sections of the Catholic community.
2. They fear that the current rioting could lead to a major confrontation between the Security Forces and the Catholic community. They are also anxious that, with the community polarised, there are dangers of intersectorian violence. Though only a minority think that political status should be granted the great majority of the Catholic community believe that it is up to Government as the stronger party somehow to resolve the impasse.
3. At the same time, many Catholics, even those who do not support militant Republicanism, instinctively sympathise with the H Block protestors, who strike a deep chord in nationalist sentiment. Candidates in the local elections standing on an H Block ticket, some with Provo connexions, did well. Mr Gerry Fitt who spoke out against the hunger strike was defeated.
4. We have detected no great upsurge of popular support for the Provisionals. Catholics resent PIRA attempts over the past few weeks to manipulate them. They are deeply worried about the trouble which PIRA can bring to their communities. But though they blame PIRA too for the stalemate in the hunger strike, they have no illusions that PIRA will prove flexible and this accentuates their tendency to look to Government to make a move.
5. The necessary actions of the security forces in containing riots are inevitably exploited by PIRA sympathisers: and the longer street confrontations continue, the more tempting it becomes for those Catholics, caught in the ghettos, to blame them on the security forces. Familiar allegations are already circulating about army and police brutality, and are widely believed.

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6. It is clear, not least from intelligence sources, that the shift of Catholic opinion described above has been a major aim of PIRA policy. We have evidence of an organised campaign to stir up anger over the security forces' activities, for example. As the hunger strike continues, Catholic frustration is turning increasingly to bitterness and anger. Alienation of the community poses difficulties for every day Government and puts at risk the return to normality in the Province. The task of the security forces in policing Catholic areas has become more difficult and the growing acceptance of the RUC by the Catholic community is being checked. Intelligence confirms stories that PIRA terrorists are finding the population of West Belfast more ready than they were a few weeks ago to give them the passive support they need to operate.

7. We have succeeded in getting through to PIRA, to the Protestants and of the Catholics the important message that Government cannot yield on the five demands, or on political status. That message must not change. Our problem is, at the same time, that we must not allow those seeking the alienation of the Catholic community by exploiting their fears to achieve their aim.

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

26 May 1981

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Catholics - more sympathetic

Protestants - something should be done

Intersected

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