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MR ALEXANDER

copied to: Ireland Situation Pt 9.

There follows a brief summary of the points made to me by Sir Kenneth Stowe earlier this afternoon, which I reported to you.

2. There is reason to believe that the PIRA have been thinking seriously about an end to the campaign of violence, but feel that they need a success, an avenue to pursue their aims politically, and something more on the prison regime.

3. The Fermanagh by-election has given them the success, and a political opening, which there is reason to think they hope to follow up in the local government elections.

4. The Sands campaign was supported by a considerable amount of money from the Republic, and by Miss Shelagh de Valera, who has previously been recommending a cease-fire. She is probably close to Mr Haughey again, and he probably sees the by-election result as a major success in steering the PIRA away from violence and towards politics.

5. There is reason to believe that the PIRA expect that, if enough of a push can be made in the next 10 days, it will be possible to bring the prison protests to an end.

6. ~~The~~ security assessment is that, assuming no concession is made on the prison regime or the hunger strike, Sands will die roundabout Easter. His by-election success will make resulting violence sharper. It may last for some days. They feel confident they can contain it.

7. Both communities in Northern Ireland will be watching from their different points of view what the Government's reaction is to the Sands by-election. The Catholics will be hoping and the Protestants will be fearing that the Government will offer some concession as a way out of the hunger strike. This cannot be given, but in the immediate aftermath of the by-election the Prime Minister's reaction should be very low key.



The Northern Ireland Office will propose the following ingredients:

- (a) What ^{the Prime Minister} ~~she~~ says should not condemn the electoral process which got Sands elected, though she should of course condemn the violence which got him into the Maze.
- (b) There is nothing we can add to what the Government has already said about the prison regime. The Prime Minister might, however, refer to the "responsible criticism" put forward by the European Commission on Human Rights. There is some reason to believe that in that area might lie the key to meeting the aspirations of the Catholic community on the prison regime: the European Commissioners might have a role to play in examining the prison regime and advising how the authorities should continue to respond to the protest. What the Prime Minister might say should not develop, still less recommend, this idea, but she could use words which would be read by people as an indication that the Government have listened to the suggestions of the ECHR.

8. In general Sir Kenneth Stowe emphasised that the by-election had had an extremely unsettling affect and that the Government's response should be very cautious and low key.

g. I was able to give the Prime Minister the gist of this orally; so this is for the record.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

13 April 1981