

SECRET

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PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland: The Hunger Strike

1. This minute reports developments since our discussion on Friday morning. Michael Alison has had a number of meetings with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP); and the Commission have several times been into the Maze to see the strikers. It has been made clear to them and to the Press that they are not negotiating but simply informing the prisoners of the implications of my statement of 30 June.

2. The latest position emerging from these talks is that the ICJP are planning to issue a statement later today, which they first wish to show to Michael Alison. The contents of this statement are not known at the time I write this minute, but I will report on it orally at our meeting at 7.00 pm.

3. In parallel with these discussions we have been approached by a third party who is trusted by the top Provisional leadership. Again, no negotiations have been taking place but it is obviously only sensible that if the Provisional leadership wish to communicate something to us indirectly about this critical problem, we should not refuse to listen. They have set out the kind of approach which they would find acceptable as a way of bringing both the strike and the protest to an end - and their views are important because so far they seem to be largely in control of the strikers.

4. Their position is that they support the statement issued on behalf of the prisoners on Saturday (copy attached), and would seem to be as follows:

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SECRET

SECRET



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- (a) They are no longer pressing for differential treatment for "their" prisoners.
- (b) HMG should make a public statement indicating that, after the hunger strike and protest had ended,
 - (i) all prisoners would be allowed to wear their own clothes all the time (but they accept that the authorities should control the type of clothing allowed sufficiently to avoid, eg all PIRA prisoners wearing a uniform);
 - (ii) all prisoners should have visits, parcels and letters on a scale similar to that now available to conforming prisoners;
 - (iii) discussions would be held with the prisoners about the precise nature and extent of (a) the work they should undertake, and (b) the degree of association they would be allowed.
- (c) The statement would also have to be more precise (and it is suggested, but not insisted upon, more generous) about the arrangements for restoring lost remission.
- (d) That statement would have to be shown to, and be acceptable to, the Provisional leaders before it was published.

SECRET

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SECRET

5. In the light of all this we would appear to have five courses open to us. I have thought it right at what may be a critical point to set out all the options, not merely those that are acceptable.

6. First, we can continue to stand absolutely firm as a matter of policy and in the hope that some or all of the hunger strikers will give up their fast in spite of the instructions of the Provisional leaders. If they did so, it would be a severe blow to the Provisionals (even though, if they saw it coming, they might of course make a virtue of necessity by leaping in with instructions to end the strike).

7. Second, we could try to reach a settlement on whatever lines may be indicated by the ICJP in their statement, ignoring the message from the Provisionals. In doing this we should again be relying on the willingness of the strikers to go against the PIRA leadership.

8. Third, we could seek to reach a settlement on ICJP lines simultaneously showing the terms to the Provisionals, so as to try to swing their leadership behind the strikers. There would be a good deal of jockeying for position as between the ICJP, who would very understandably want some credit for any settlement, and the Provisionals, who regard the ICJP as an intrusion and an irrelevance and who would be looking for a way of claiming a "victory" for the strikers.

SECRET

SECRET

9. Fourth, we could drop the ICJP and talk to the Provisionals on the grounds that they are much more likely to be in a position to make an agreement stick with the strikers than the ICJP.

10. Fifth, if the ICJP fails, and we will not talk to the Provisionals, and no prisoner will complain to the European Commission on Human Rights, we could, as we envisaged on Friday, call in the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Conclusion

11. My judgement, and that of Michael Alison who has been close to the latest moves with the ICJP, is that the best course is to continue to stand firm. There is always the chance that the strike will, in whole or in part, collapse of itself, leaving the Provisional leadership humiliated. However, while recommending this course, I must point out that it carries certain risks and disadvantages:

- (i) It may end the hunger strike; it is unlikely to end the main "blanket" protest (on which over 400 prisoners are still engaged).
- (ii) It could lead to a resumption of the "dirty" protest.
- (iii) It could lead to a later resumption of the hunger strike by other prisoners.
- (iv) The Provisionals need to settle the prisons problem on terms they can represent as acceptable to them if they are to go on - as we know some of them wish to do - to consider an end of the current terrorist campaign. A leadership which has "lost" on the prisons is in no position to do this.

SECRET

SECRET

- (v) We should be discouraging the Provisionals from switching from terrorist to political activity at the very moment when we know that they have begun to find political action attractive.

A Statement

12. Since rumour is rife in Northern Ireland about the ICJP talks, and the ICJP are themselves preparing to issue a statement, I suggest we need to be ready with a statement of our own. This could refer back to our statement of last Tuesday, welcome the indication that the strikers (in their statement of Saturday) are no longer seeking a differential regime (and thus "political status"), suggest that proposals for changes in prison conditions (which in any case we have always been prepared to consider) are not worth dying for, and express the hope that the strike will now end so as to enable consideration of such changes to continue. I hope to bring a draft of such a statement with me at 7 pm.

13. If such a statement does not bring the strike to an end we shall of course have to face McDonnell's and other deaths very soon now, and no doubt a resurgence of trouble in the Province, with the subsequent bad media coverage this will engender. However, I commend this course in preference to the kind of deal which is at present the only alternative likely to produce quick and lasting results.

14. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary, the Lord Privy Seal, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Alison and Sir Robert Armstrong.

H.A.

H.A.
6 July 1981

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