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MR ALEXANDER

THE HUNGER STRIKERS AND JOHN HUME

A subject right outside my remit, and about which I know nothing; but that doesn't stop me dropping you a simple thought which can't possibly be new.

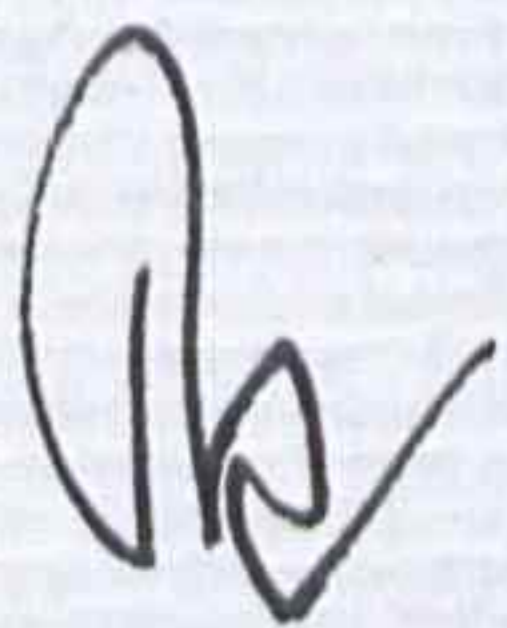
Listening to John Hume on the radio as I drove in this morning, I was struck by the illogical nature of his argument, no doubt presented in good faith.

"If the Government could be a little bit more flexible, the prison could be resolved."

He was saying that the whole business of the hunger striking was really now "about words"; in other words, a huge and tragic political problem all centring round whether or not the prisoners can wear their own clothes as women are apparently allowed to do. The point I am making is obvious: if the British Government is getting the whole thing out of proportion and showing "intransigence" etc by sticking absolutely to the letter of the rules even though people are committing suicide in protest, are they really being any more unreasonable than the people who are prepared to commit suicide (or are prepared to instruct those people to commit suicide) over this same apparently trivial issue?

This obvious symmetry in the situation never seems to be picked up by the commentators and thrown back at the people they are interviewing. It appears reasonable to fast to the death in order to wear a checked shirt; unreasonable to refuse that request.

The other point that never seems to come up is "What would happen if, after receiving this concession, the prisoners make a further (and presumably more substantive) demand?"



JOHN HOSKYNs