



Ireland JD
cc. Master set.

SUBJECT.

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

21 May, 1981.

Dear Stephen,

Northern Ireland

The Prime Minister held a meeting yesterday evening to consider the handling of the situation arising from the prison protests in Northern Ireland, on the basis of the paper enclosed with your letter of 15 May to Michael Alexander. The Home Secretary, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Lord Privy Seal, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Attorney General were present, as well as Sir Robert Armstrong and Mr. Wade-Gery.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that the situation in the Province had altered in some respects since the paper was written. Questions relating to the European Commission on Human Rights had been resolved following the two meetings held by the Prime Minister on 18 May. But a time of considerable difficulty lay ahead. The next hunger striker (McCreesh) would probably die the following day, and a fourth (O'Hara) by the end of the week. There should then be an interval of 3-4 weeks before the fifth striker (who had started his strike only when Sands died) would be near death, unless he chose to accelerate the process by refusing water as well as food. There was no sign that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) leadership, which was controlling the strikers, would let them give up; and there was no doubt that McCreesh's family, including his brother who was a priest, had specifically dissuaded him from breaking his fast on 16 May. Rioting would no doubt continue. But the Security Forces' success in confining it to the Catholic areas where it broke out meant that the PIRA had failed in their aim of provoking widespread violence between the two communities; and hostility to the rioting was building up among moderate Catholics, on whose property and daily lives its damaging effects were concentrated. The PIRA might therefore put less effort into starting riots and turn back to their established policy of attacking members of the Security Forces. Given the continuous strain to which the Security Forces were subjected, there was always the risk of a mistake on their part leading to an accidental death which could spark off even more serious trouble. But they were so far coping well with the situation, and there was beginning to be some scope for shortening their exceptionally long periods on duty. Meanwhile, following the local elections in the Province which were taking place that day, he himself would be having talks with local political leaders about the

mechanics of restarting the process of political development. What the substance of that process might now be was a matter on which he would be consulting his OD colleagues in about two weeks' time. This timetable took account of the need, at the end of June, to seek from Parliament authority for the continuation of direct rule for a further year. In the meantime every effort should be made to win the propaganda battle, both at home and abroad; and to this end he had already established an informal group of officials which would meet frequently and regularly in London, in parallel with the operational group already meeting daily in Belfast. Criticism in the United States had been stemmed, but might increase again if there were more deaths. In the Republic of Ireland Mr. Haughey was under very strong pressure to attack the British Government's stance, but was resisting this, thanks to his interest in maintaining the special relationship established at the Dublin Summit and continued by the Joint Studies. If he had been less restrained, the current situation in Northern Ireland would have been much worse.

The meeting endorsed the general approach set out in the paper enclosed with your letter of 15 May 1981. It was agreed that there was no alternative to the Government's present policy, in pursuit of which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had the fullest support of his colleagues. At some stage it might be appropriate for the Prime Minister to send a carefully worded message about the situation in the Province to selected Heads of other Governments. But this might be more effective if done in the context of a new initiative for local political development. One major disadvantage of the lack of such development was that no new political leadership was able to evolve; and further discussion with existing leaders was liable to remain as unproductive as in the past. Meanwhile public criticism was growing in Great Britain over the ceremonies with which the PIRA were able to surround the funerals of their members. Government policy in this regard could not be changed, but there might be a case for re-emphasising in public the practical reasons which lay behind it.

I am sending copies of this letter to John Halliday (Home Office), Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Michael Arthur (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Brian Norbury (Ministry of Defence), Jim Nursaw (Law Officers' Department), and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever,

Heri Whinnor.

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Northern Ireland Office.