

CONFIDENTIAL

PRIME MINISTER

Maze Prison Hunger Strike

BACKGROUND

Seven prisoners at the Maze Prison will begin a hunger strike on Monday. The Home Secretary's minute of 21st October reported to you the outcome of a long discussion at H Committee on the tactical issues raised by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his paper H(80) 74. Members of the Cabinet will have seen that paper and the fuller account of the discussion in the minutes of H Committee meeting (H(80) 21st Meeting, Minute 1).

2. There is no doubt of the determination of the strikers and considerable doubt if the strike could be averted, even if the Government were to offer the only concession to the strikers' demands and the representation of Cardinal O'Fiaich that seems practicable: a change in the rules on clothing so that all prisoners in Northern Ireland would, in the course of time, be issued with a more varied range of civilian-type clothing. They would not be allowed to wear their own clothing, which, in the case of the IRA, would soon amount to a uniform. It was the majority view of H Committee that such a concession should not now be made. The possibility of making such a concession at a later stage could not be ruled out, and the wording of any Government statement would have to be carefully considered with the possibility of future developments in mind. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was disposed to accept that advice subject to further consultation with the Chief Constable.

3. H Committee also felt that the Government had a good case to make to counter the propaganda on behalf of the prisoners but that this had not as yet been adequately deployed.

4. Unless, therefore, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland brings new factors to the attention of Cabinet - and we understand that his consultations with the Chief Constable have not produced anything fresh - it should suffice for the Cabinet to endorse the decision not to offer any concessions to the strikers at this stage and to consider how best the Government's case can be deployed.

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On this, we understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has already been in touch with the Paymaster General. He has it in mind to make a statement on Thursday evening or Friday but does not think it would be helpful to make a further statement in Parliament on Monday since by then there will be nothing new to say.

HANDLING

5. You will wish to ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to report briefly on the present position and on the lines of the statement he has it in mind to make. The Home Secretary can confirm the views of H Committee and also the undesirability from his point of view of making a change in the prison regime in Northern Ireland which could not be made at the same time in Great Britain. The Lord Privy Seal may wish to comment from the point of view of relations with the Irish Republic and your forthcoming talks with Mr. Haughey. How far can those talks introduce a new factor into the situation? The Paymaster General will want to comment on how the Government's case can best be presented.

6. The Chancellor of the Duchy and the Lord President may have views on whether it will in fact be possible to avoid a Parliamentary statement. To be forced into answering a Parliamentary Question might be worse than offering a statement in the first instance.

CONCLUSION

7. Subject to the discussion, the Cabinet may not need to do more than note the position in the Maze Prison, confirm again that there can be no compromise on the question of granting political status, and agree that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should offer no concessions to the strikers in the statement he proposes to make on Thursday or Friday. He might be invited to discuss further with the Paymaster General the arrangements for that statement. The Cabinet will need to record a firm view on the need or otherwise for a statement in Parliament.

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(Robert Armstrong)

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On this, we understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has
already been in touch with the British Ambassador. He has in mind to make
a statement on Thursday evening or Friday but does not think it would be helpful
to make a further statement in London on Monday since by then there will be
nothing new to say.

HANDLING

You will wish to ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to report
briefly on the present position and on the lines of the statement he has in mind
to make. The Home Secretary can comment on the views of the Committee and also
the uncertainty from his point of view of making a change in the present regime
in Northern Ireland which could not be made at the same time in Great Britain.
The Home Secretary will be concerned from the point of view of relations
with the Irish Republic and your last meeting with Mr. Humphrey. How far
can you make the Home Secretary a new proposal in the statement. The Home Secretary
will want to consult with the Government's case can be

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The Secretary of State and the Lord President may have views on
whether it is possible to make a further statement. To be
forced into a statement which might be worse than offering a
statement in the first place.

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Subject to the discussion, the Cabinet may not need to do more than note
the position in the Home Office, confirm again that there can be no compromise
on the question of granting political status, and agree that the Secretary of State
for Northern Ireland should offer no concessions to the Irish in the statement
he proposes to make on Thursday or Friday. It will be invited to discuss
further with the British Ambassador the arrangements for a statement.
Cabinet will need to record a firm view on the need or otherwise for a statement
in Paris etc.

(Signed)

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