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Ireland

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From the Secretary of the Cabinet: Sir Robert Armstrong KCB, CVO

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Meeting with the Irish: The Maze and Security Co-operation

It was helpful to have your brief on these related topics. I was able to get across both main points.

Just as we had concluded the main business of the meeting (setting the joint studies into motion), Dermot Nally said that the Taoiseach had asked him to impress upon us the importance of doing all in our power to prevent a recurrence of hunger striking in the Maze. Although Mr. Haughey had not yet decided when to call elections - Mr. Nally told me privately later that this was likely to be within the next six months - it would be extremely difficult for him, in what was for practical purposes the run up to an election, to take a strong line against those in the Republic who campaigned in support of such action. He hoped that we might be able to deal flexibly with the situation, if that were necessary "to get over a hump". If matters went off the rails, the consequences could be very serious. I replied that we would continue to look for ways of winding down the tension, within the principle that we could not concede to some prisoners the right to a different regime from others. Mr. Nally said that that principle was not in any way in question, and was fully accepted.

This exchange gave me the opening to point out to the Irish that, although - as we gladly acknowledged - practical co-operation between our respective police forces was excellent, the unwillingness of Irish Ministers to take credit for their efforts in public speeches allowed the myth of Irish unco-operativeness to flourish in the North. Michael Moriarty endorsed my remarks. Mr. Nally replied that the Taoiseach was due to make an important speech on 13th or 14th February and undertook to see whether a passage could be included which might go some way to meeting our point. We shall see.

I am sending copies of this letter to Michael Palliser and Brian Cubbon, and to Michael Alexander.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Sir Kenneth Stowe, KCB, CVO

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