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From the Principal Private Secretary

27 April 1981

Dear Roy,

SANDS

Your Secretary of State called upon the Prime Minister this afternoon to report on the Sands case.

He summarised the main developments which had occurred while the Prime Minister had been overseas and in particular described the involvement of the European Commission on Human Rights. He believed that it was only yesterday that the PIRA had fully understood that the British Government was not prepared to change its position. Sands, who was completely under the direction of the PIRA, had reacted to the failure of the Commissioners' visit by accusing Mr Haughey of bad faith and of misleading his family. Mr Haughey would find himself in a dilemma if Sands died: he would have to choose between preserving the new momentum in relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic which had followed the Dublin summit and trying to outbid those extreme republican politicians who would seek to capitalise on Sands's death in the period leading up to the forthcoming Irish election.

Mr Atkins said that Sands was now very close to death. He could no longer keep down water and he was likely to go into a coma very soon. He had given the prison authorities explicit instructions that the doctors were to do nothing to prevent his death. In practice, once he went into a coma, the doctors would ask his family if they wanted them to intervene. If they did, the doctors would revive him once and ask him whether he wanted them to treat him. If he said no, they would do no more and would let him die. Similarly, if his family said that they did not want the doctors to intervene, nothing would be done. If Sands received no medical treatment, the latest forecast was that he would die on Wednesday.

The present security situation was well under control. Last week's rioting had been centred on Londonderry, although there had been lesser outbreaks elsewhere. The security forces had been responding in a very restrained way and had been arresting people after the riots on the basis of photographic evidence. The rioters were now running out of acid for acid bombs and there was evidence that they were turning to blast bombs and military-style hand-grenades. Whereas the security forces had been responding to petrol and acid bombs with plastic bullets, the Chief Constable had made it clear

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that the security forces would shoot anyone seen throwing hand-grenades.

Mr Atkinson continued that if Sands died, there would be an enormous turn out for his funeral. There would be large-scale rioting, and the plans of the security forces for dealing with the situation were already laid. Their primary aim would be to stop Catholic demonstrators invading Protestant areas. There was already a certain amount of evidence that Protestant paramilitary organisations were getting ready to protect Protestant areas against Catholic rioters. If the security forces were unable to prevent intercommunal clashes, serious disturbances were likely to follow. The Chief Constable's present assessment was that provided major intercommunal violence could be prevented, the republican demonstrations would be likely to last two or three days and then die out, to give way to a resumption of the PIRA's campaign which was directed specifically at members of the security forces. Mr Herman believed that it might help to reduce the scale of the trouble, if a small number of people who could normally be expected to be involved in directing the riots were arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and taken out of circulation for a few days. Your Secretary of State said that he proposed to sign the necessary orders for this purpose.

The Prime Minister agreed that this step should be taken. It was likely that Sands's death would lead to a resumption of PIRA terrorism in Great Britain. We also had to look ahead to what would happen as the other hunger strikers moved towards a critical condition.

Your Secretary of State said that the next hunger striker, Hughes, was fourteen days behind Sands and two others a week behind Hughes. One of the latter two was deteriorating rather faster than the others. If Sands died a full assessment of likely developments would immediately be provided for the Prime Minister. His death would make it imperative to change the law to prevent prisoners serving sentences from being elected as Members of Parliament: otherwise the Provisional Sinn Fein would put up one hunger striker after another as candidates.

The Prime Minister said that further work on this problem had now been done and the Home Secretary had told her that morning that it now appeared that the law could be changed relatively easily to make it impossible for prisoners serving sentences of more than a certain specified length to be nominated as candidates in a Parliamentary election.

I am sending a copy of this letter to David Wright (Cabinet Office).

*Yours sincerely,*

*Shirley Williams*

Roy Harrington Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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