

MR. ALEXANDER

Disclosure of Cabinet Decision on Northern Ireland

1. The facts as we understand them in Press Office are:

On Wednesday evening - i.e. night before Cabinet - I took a call from W. Ross, M.P., Londonderry, reporting that he had learned from TV that the threatened hunger strike was to be discussed in Cabinet the following day; he wanted the topic replaced on the agenda by some other Northern Irish issue; I reported facts to Mr. Pattison. In reply, I told Mr. Ross that it was not our practice to disclose Cabinet agendas and I would be astounded if my staff had done so. I checked with them the following morning and they confirmed the point. We did not refute the story, as NIO suggest; had we done so, we would have been lying.

- There were, however, firm assertions in the press that morning that the subject was on the Cabinet agenda.
- At the 11 a.m. Lobby, in response to questions, I said that the threatened hunger strike might well be discussed. I deliberately did not lead the Lobby to expect a statement later because there is always the risk that plans go awry - I prefer to let people know after Cabinet if there are to be statements; we have a well-established practice of ringing over any additions to our guidance.
- At the 11 a.m. Lobby it was clear that BBC knew that Mr. Atkins was seeing the Cardinal that afternoon.

*This may have been a real leak & I have asked the NIO to look into the background.*

*And*

- At no time before Northern Ireland Office took their initiative direct with the media did we from No. 10 give any hint of the outcome of the Cabinet's discussion. Nor were we, in Mr. Gaffin's view, asked to agree to NIO's plan to give Flackes and McCartan "a more explicit hint"; we were told NIO were doing, or had done it. We raised no objections. NIO Press Office had been put in an impossible position and by then, of course, the Cabinet's decision was clear and action was in train.

2. It is very important that at all times individual Departments should be in the lead on their subjects; they are closer to the issues and circumstances.

3. I shall not enter into the argument whether the need to spike the Cardinal's guns was adequate justification. All I would say is that NIO and No. 10 press offices were put in a very difficult position by those who so firmly leaked the fact that the threatened hunger strike was on the Cabinet agenda.

B. INGHAM

29 October, 1980