

IOM (80) 7

NOTE OF A MEETING HELD IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
ON FRIDAY 21 NOVEMBER 1980

Present:

Mr Marshall	Chairman
Mr Blelloch	NIO
Mr Moriarty	
Mr Buxton	
Mr Ledlie	
Mr Spence	
Mr Blackwell	
Mr Bridges	
Mr Hall	
Mr Bengier	
Mr Stephens	MOD
Mr Farthing	
Col Bateman	
Col Morton	
Maj Pheysey	
Mr Newington	FCO
Miss Drew	Home Office

1. Mr Stephens introduced Col Morton who had taken over from Col Wilson in M04.

The Security Situation and the Hunger Strike

2. Mr Blelloch said that the paper presented to OD summarised matters. The security situation had been dominated by first the threat and then the actuality of the hunger strike. In the first **phase** which ended when the hunger strike began 27 October, the problem had been to decide on the attitude which the Government would adopt. It had been decided to stand firm on political status but to make changes in prison clothing; this had been the correct course to adopt to have any possible effect on the potential hunger-strikers, but presentation of HMG's position could have been less confused. Since then public comment on HMG's attitude had been at least as favourable

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As could be expected; indeed, the speech by Mr Fitt in the Commons, Cardinal Hume's **pastoral** letter and editorials in certain US papers had been positive bonuses.

3. There had been some 250 demonstrations in the Province, by far the largest being a march by 10,000 people in Belfast in 26 October. Apart from one march at Coalisland there had been no other marches on a comparable scale. The RUC had handled the marches very well giving no excuse for complaint either to the Republicans or the loyalists; at no stage has it been necessary to call on the Army for assistance. There were indications that since 26 October the organisers of the H-Block Protest were worried by the lack of public support and they might well feel the need to step up action in order to provoke the Loyalists and the security forces. It was impossible to forecast what would happen as the strike approached crisis point: for the moment it was best to press on with the propaganda battle; it was gratifying to note that there was little support anywhere for political status.

4. Mr Hall asked whether there was a generally agreed definition of political status. Mr Blelloch replied that there was not and Mr Newington said that the position was rather vague under international law; it was heartening to note that the Pope had stressed that terrorism, for whatever motive, was unacceptable. Mr Ledlie thought it desirable that HMG spell out exactly what the protesters were demanding but not going to receive. Mr Blelloch said that Mr Alison had already stated that the protesters were effectively demanding prisoner of war status; this would confer a degree of legitimacy on their crimes and hold out the hope of eventual amnesty. Mr Newington said that in international terms we should stress that the protesters were demanding privileges not available to other prisoners. Mr Bridges said that this point had been brought out in an interview with Mr Alison which was to be broadcast on "World in Action" on Monday 24 November.

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Military assistance during industrial action

Prisons

5. Mr Blelloch said that it would not be necessary to open a second temporary prison unless the prison officers' action went on for much longer than expected or the informal arrangements governing the handling of prisoners in the Province broke down; there was still plenty of room at HM Prison Foyle, Mr Blackwell said that the remand order would need to be renewed during the next week under the negative resolution procedure; it might well be prayed against in the Lords.

Firemen

6. Mr Blackwell said that delegates from the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) were meeting today and were likely to call a series of lightning strikes, the first being a one-day national strike with notice and the rest being random with no notice. Due to the previous possibility of a strike by retained firemen, preparations in Northern Ireland were well advanced; the retained firemen were not going to strike but they would not move into areas manned by the FBU. This, in effect, left the Army to cover Belfast and Londonderry; training should be complete by the end of Friday and the Green Goddesses would be available once work had been completed on their brakes. Once preparations were complete the Army would wait for a formal request from the civil authorities; this would come through the Department of the Environment (NI) but no action would be taken until ~~Ministers~~ so decided; the response time would be less than the 24 hours required in GB. Fire officers might not be available to give expert advice to the Army at the scene of fires since only the Senior Fire Officer and his deputy were likely to be available to assist. This lack of expert assistance was more likely to occur in Londonderry; instructions to soldiers emphasised that the preservation of life was the first priority.

S E C R E T

The Yellow and Pink Cards

7. The Chairman noted that a submission recommending acceptance of the terms of the revised Pink and Yellow Cards which would be issued on 1 January was with the Secretary of State.

Accommodation for a resident battalion at Portadown

8. Mr Buxton said that the proposed construction of accommodation for a resident battalion at Portadown had been abandoned by MOD, largely for economic reasons. The Secretary of State was concerned that the timing of the announcement could be unfortunate in view of the tense situation in the Province. Officials from MOD and NIO had discussed the problem and the current plan was for Mr Alison to explain the position to Mr McCusker, the constituency MP, after which Mr Hayhoe would write to Mr McCusker; the matter would be made public through an arranged PQ which, it was hoped, Mr McCusker could be persuaded to table. The general view was that this should be done as soon as possible since the situation might well get worse rather than better in the immediate and foreseeable future.

9. Mr Stephens thanked NIO for their co-operation and in response to a question from the chairman, said that he did not think that the recent articles in the "Daily Telegraph" about troop withdrawals would have much effect; the stories had been denied and were unlikely to be taken up since other newspapers were aware of the "Telegraph's" views on Northern Ireland.

The Fermanagh Border Study

10. Mr Ledlie said that the study would not be as extensive as previous area reviews. The fieldwork was complete and the first draft had been circulated. It was hoped to put the report to SPM within the next month. At the moment terrorist activity had declined but the document would be a useful basis for discussion in the future

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of the problem arose again.

Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978 (EPA)

11. The Chairman said that he hoped that the EPA could be renewed during the second week of December; no changes would be recommended. Mr Buxton said that there might be difficulties in this as the security forces had not yet **commented** but there would be merit in sticking to the usual timetable and having the debate in December. The Chairman thought it desirable to have the debate before Christmas as nobody could forecast the position in January.

Political matters

12. The Chairman said that the Queen's speech had been deliberately non-committal; the Prime Minister had conceded that we had not got the consensus deemed necessary in the White Paper (Cmnd 7950) and other methods were being examined. It was the first time that HMG had officially admitted this fact. It was likely that a statement would be made within the first three months of 1981; it was not possible to forecast the contents.

Forthcoming meeting between Prime Minister and Taoiseach in Dublin

13. Mr Newington said that briefing would be co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office and would be required by 28 November. Lord Carrington had recommended that the Prime Minister grant an interview to RTE which would then probably be broadcast on radio at lunchtime on Sunday 30 November. FCO were pressing for a list of questions on more sensitive issues in advance. The Prime Minister had not yet indicated whether she had accepted Lord Carrington's advice. Mr Newington added that he personally was not in favour of a press interview in the south as none had been granted to newspapers in the North.