

Ref. A04946

PRIME MINISTER

Prison Protests in Northern Ireland

You are due to have a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and other Ministers to discuss this subject at 6.00 pm on Wednesday 20th May. To provide a basis for discussion his Private Secretary wrote to Michael Alexander on 15th May enclosing a paper.

2. Although in his paper the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland defines his aim as seeking his colleagues' views on the way forward, there is no suggestion that there should be a change of policy in regard to the hunger strikers. But the meeting should provide a useful occasion for an objective assessment of the wider implications of the hunger strike including the position of the security forces, international pressures, the long-term prisons problem in Northern Ireland and the attitudes of the two communities in Northern Ireland.

3. The hunger strike could be a very long-drawn out affair. The PIRA claim that they have got 70 potential hunger strikers lined up, so that as current strikers die there will be a steady stream of replacements. Public opinion in the United Kingdom and in Parliament has not so far shown much reaction to the deaths which have taken place to date. Abroad and in Northern Ireland the effects have been greater.

4. The ECHR looks like a dead duck as a means of bringing the hunger strike to an end, at least unless and until the Provisional IRA change their minds and abandon their insistence on the five demands. In the meantime the ECHR's only conceivable advantage is as an instrument in the propaganda war: if we stick firmly to the line that we shall not stand in the way of but facilitate the Commission's pursuit of any complaint which is admissible under the Convention, it is difficult to fault that position, and we have a reasonably good defence against the charge of inflexibility on this score.

5. But hunger strikers will, it seems, go on dying. We ought to try to assess the effects of this on the two communities in Northern Ireland, and on the security forces. It will presumably harden the polarisation of the two

communities. The Protestant community will no doubt be reasonably content to see the British Government standing firm, and their paramilitaries will hold off. But will continuing deaths weaken the strength and support of the SDLP in the Catholic community, and incline them to turn back to the Provisionals? It would be a serious development in security terms, if a growing sense of despair in the Catholic community increased their readiness to offer safe havens and other assistance to the PIRA terrorists. And the price of standing firm may be - perhaps is already being - increased casualties in the security forces. Do we have to do any more in political terms to maintain their morale in the face of these attacks?

6. The other question is that of long-term political development. The apparent absence of a policy on long-term political development represents a real weakness in the Government's present position. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland proposes that after the District Council elections he should propose to invite all the local parties to come and talk to him about how we might best proceed. But should he not have some positive ideas of his own to suggest? Is there a risk that the situation will become further complicated and inflamed if at the same time there is an election campaign being waged in the Republic? It is perhaps premature to spend much time at this meeting on this subject. It is now unlikely that there could be any significant development this side of the Summer Recess, and before embarking upon a process of consultations the Secretary of State ought to let the dust settle after the local elections in Northern Ireland - and await the result of the general election in the Republic. But the Northern Ireland Office could well use the interval to consider what possible ideas the Secretary of State might contribute to a political discussion later in the year.

7. In regard to long-term policy on prisons, paragraph 7 of Mr. Atkins's note explains that some review of the present prison regime will be needed before the new prison opens at Maghaberry in late 1982. While this is true, is it likely to be helpful in relation to resolving the present problems?

HANDLING

8. In regard to handling this meeting you may care to leave the question of the ECHR to one side as that has already been recently ventilated. Instead, after inviting the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to introduce his paper, you may like to start by concentrating on the short-term problem. Discussion might include the following points:-



- (a) What are likely to be the effects on the two communities in Northern Ireland of continuing deaths of hunger strikers? Is there anything the Government can and should do to counter those effects, in so far as they are malign?
- (b) What are the views of the GOC and Chief Constable on the ability of the security forces to stand up to the current strains? Do they expect any significant increase in these as more hunger strikers die? Are further reinforcements likely to be required? Is there likely to be a need for any change in the basic pattern of security force operations?
- (c) Does the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary consider that the current PIRA propaganda campaign abroad is being sufficiently effectively opposed? Paragraphs 17 and 18 of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's note deals with this problem.
- (d) Does the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland anticipate any great problems in Parliament as a result of the hunger strike?

CONCLUSION

9. It will not be the aim of your meeting to arrive at any fundamental conclusions affecting current policy. There is general agreement that in relation to the hunger strikers this must remain unchanged. But you may wish to seek to achieve the following three objectives at your meeting:-

- (a) To take due account of the views of the GOC and Chief Constable on the ways in which the security forces might be assisted to cope with the present problems.
- (b) To agree with Mr. Atkins's proposals to set up an informal group of officials to deal with the propaganda campaign.
- (c) To recognise the need for, and invite the Secretary of State to consider the possible form of, a new policy on long-term political development in Northern Ireland.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

19th May, 1981