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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Michael Alexander Esq
Private Secretary
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1

14 August 1981

Dear Michael

NORTHERN IRELAND: HUNGER STRIKE AND RELATED MATTERS

I wrote to you on 9 August ^{in PM Box} setting out the position at that time. My Secretary of State thought it might be helpful for me to bring the position up-to-date and to summarise the prospects before he leaves on holiday. Michael Alison is, of course, himself fully up-to-date.

In the Maze, the ninth hunger striker (McIlwee) has died: Quinn is still in a civil hospital, is well on the way to full recovery and clearly off his hunger strike. There has been one replacement (Sheehan) for Doherty bringing the total back to six hunger strikers: the Provisionals have said replacement will be on a weekly basis rather than as deaths occur so we expect a seventh hunger striker to begin his fast on Monday 17 August. Of the present six Devine is now on day 54 and McKeown on day 47 and so unless they call it off we must expect two further deaths over the next three weeks.

Outside the prison there have since 5 August been a number of important traditional events, notably the 10th Anniversary of Internment on 9 August and the Apprentice Boys March in Londonderry on the 12th. Although McIlwee's death immediately preceded the former, both passed off with less public disorder than might have been expected. There are two other important Republican events this weekend: thereafter the "marching season" begins to draw to a close. Meanwhile terrorist attacks have continued at a significant level. This is likely to remain the case, with the terrorists continuing to concentrate on members of the security forces.

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One important feature of the present security situation is the continuing campaign against the use of plastic baton rounds, as being unsafe (cf. The Guardian of 13 August). The safety of the various systems is in fact being looked at again, given the importance which both the RUC and the Army attach to them.

In the Republic, the hunger strike remains the dominant political issue, and Government Ministers have made a number of statements recently. The Taoiseach, Mr O'Leary, made an off-the-cuff attack on the "failure" of the (British) Government to solve the crisis when he repeated the accusation of Government "intransigence and inflexibility". A couple of days later Mr Kelly, acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, in an apparent attempt to redress the balance of responsibility, accused the IRA of seeking to exploit for their own purposes the Dublin Government's legitimate political interest in Northern affairs, and called upon them to cease their campaign of violence. He reinforced this line when he strongly rejected a call by H-Blocks campaigners for an early recall of the Dail. The Dublin Cabinet are expected to review its Northern Ireland policy on 24 and 25 August and the Ambassador has suggested (telegram 291 of 12 August) that we should take the opportunity to brief the Irish before that. The NIO will gladly help on this.

Meanwhile, pressure for some form of Government action continues. John Hume met the Secretary of State and officials on 10 August when he expressed his growing concern about the continuation of the hunger strike and the deepening divisions it is creating in the community, and between the Catholic minority and HMG and the security forces. The Provisionals were aware of his talks: he says he has since told them he got nowhere. An approach allegedly originating from Republican sympathisers in the Republic urges the establishment of a committee of prison reforms which could end the hunger strike.

A more important development is that the Rev Raymond Helmick, an English Jesuit long involved in Irish affairs, has also, in the last week, put forward complicated proposals which he claims (probably correctly) have the Provisionals' blessing. We think his approach has to be taken seriously and are considering how to respond. One possibility is for Michael Alison, or officials, to see him in Belfast next week. Although the proposals as they stand are unacceptable, this could be the first real hint that the Provisional leadership are ready to call it a day.

Looking ahead, there are four serious contenders in the field for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election on 20 August. The main contest will be between the UUP candidate and Owen Carron (Sands's former election agent) who describes himself as an "anti-H-block proxy political prisoner". The SDLP are absent, having felt unable to split the anti-Unionist vote and thereby hand the seat to the UUP. Although Alliance are in the field, as are the Republican Clubs-Workers Party, Carron could nevertheless well win the seat.

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We can also expect in the next three weeks to hear from the International Committee of the Red Cross and, possibly, when the Committee's report has been delivered, from the ECHR as well, who have held themselves in the background while the ICRC have been in business, but who have continued to show a willingness to help if we wish them to do so. (You may recall that the outstanding complaints in the Maze case - concerning correspondence and 'effective remedy before a national authority' - are being processed by the ECHR in the normal way: this will take some time.)

If the strike drags on at its present level then as opportunities occur they must be used to continue to deploy our case calmly, clearly and firmly, and show understanding of what the strike means for the Northern Ireland community and elsewhere. The longer it goes on, the stronger in logic the case for making changes (perhaps in response to well-founded suggestions by the ICRC). But such action will always of course have to be weighed against its impact on the hunger strikers; and in particular we should need to take into account the possibility that improvements would simply be pocketed and further pressure then applied.

Further thought is being given as to how, if at all, our present stance needs to be modified in the face of any escalation towards a mass strike, which would be a move consistent with the prisoners' behaviour of the past.

I am copying this letter to Roderic Lyne (FCO).

Yours sincerely
Mike Stephens

M W HOPKINS

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