

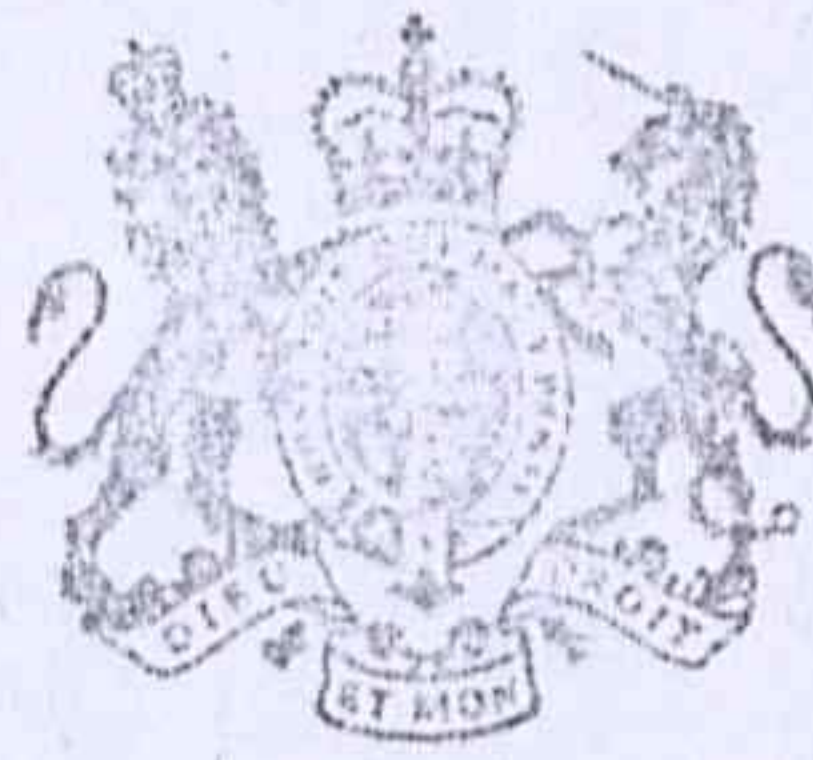
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sc. Porter act

SUBJECT.



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

7 July 1981

Dear Stephen

The Prime Minister held a meeting yesterday evening at 1930 to discuss your Secretary of State's minute of 6 July. The Home Secretary, the Lord Privy Seal, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, your Secretary of State, Mr. Woodfield and * ~ ~ ~ * were present.

Your Secretary of State introduced his paper. He said that Mr. Alison had now seen the International Commission for Justice and Peace three times. The ICJP had made it clear in public that they had been allowed into the Maze not to negotiate but to explain the Government's position. The Commission had explored in detail with the hunger strikers what improvements in the prison regime the Government were considering. Both the hunger strikers and the Commission had accepted that there was to be no negotiation, and that the Government's position was that it would only seek to improve the prison regime if the hunger strike was called off. The ICJP had also visited the hunger strikers' families, and the leader of the PIRA within the prison. They now wished to see Mr. Alison, and would probably wish to issue a statement which would probably require a response.

Your Secretary of State said that the prisoners' statement, which had been endorsed by the PIRA, contained a significant concession. The hunger strikers had given up their claim for differential treatment. They would agree to the introduction of changes in the prison regime for all prisoners in Northern Ireland. There were also indications that the PIRA felt able to end the protest on the basis of the prisoners' statement. Your Secretary of State concluded, however, that the Government should continue to stand firm. There was a chance, albeit faint, that the hunger strike would collapse of itself. He pointed out the disadvantages in this course of action, as set out in paragraph 11 of his minute. In particular, he said if the hunger strike were to end on terms that were not acceptable to the Provisionals, an end to the current terrorist campaign would be unlikely.

In discussion, the following were the main points raised:

- (a) There was some evidence that some Provisionals favoured a ceasefire. There were practical difficulties for the PIRA in maintaining a terrorist campaign. The Provisionals had gained considerable success through political, rather than terrorist, activity, following the death of Sands. However the Provisionals would never call a ceasefire from a position of weakness.

* ~ * Name deleted and retained under Section 3(4).

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/(b)

Wayland, 27 October 2011

- (b) There had been recent indications that the hunger strikers were willing to consider an end to their protest, but their resolve was now stiffening in the face of apparent inaction by the Government. The ICJP had been depressed by the commitment of the hunger strikers to their protest. Unless the Government took some action before the death of McDonnell, which was expected on Wednesday, there could be no prospect of an early end to the protest.
- (c) There was a danger that if the Government indicated that it was willing to move on one or more of the five demands, it would immediately be drawn into negotiation. Once an offer of movement had been made to the hunger strikers, it could not be withdrawn. On the other hand, too firm a stance by the Government would only strengthen the criticisms of inflexibility levelled at Ministers. It would also condemn the Government to facing further deaths of hunger strikers, with all that that entailed. There was no way of further involving the European Commission of Human Rights unless one of the prisoners or a foreign Government made a formal complaint to the Commission. The initiative therefore rested with the Government.

Summing up this part of the discussion, the Prime Minister said that it was agreed that the Government should issue a statement within the next 24 hours. This should not make concessions to the hunger strikers, but should express the hope that the protest would now end so that improvements in the prison regime could be pursued.

The meeting then moved on to consider the draft statement circulated by your Secretary of State. In discussion the following points were made:

- (a) The second paragraph on the second page referred to the Government's commitment to improvements in the prison regime. Your Secretary of State explained that the Government was constantly improving the prison regime, and was ready to continue these improvements, as he had indicated in his statement of 30 June. Recent examples of such improvements were the introduction of new workshops, more courses, and more educational facilities. It was agreed that the statement should not therefore refer to the Government's commitments, but to the Government's actions, and should say that Ministers were ready to continue the programme of improvements in the prisons once the hunger strike was over.
- (b) The Statement should not give the impression that the prisoners' demands were minor details. The public's immediate reaction to such a statement would be to ask why the Government were not willing to concede such details. Nor was it right for the statement to refer to "threat or blackmail" on the part of the prisoners.
- (c) It was agreed that of the five demands, those on remission and parcels presented few problems. Association was more difficult. Too much freedom of movement within the wings

of the Maze could put the prison officers at risk. On work, the Government would have to stand by the principle that it was for the prison Governor to decide what work was acceptable. On clothes, it might be possible to indicate that the Government were willing to agree that men should enjoy the same privileges as women in all Northern Ireland prisons.

In conclusion, it was agreed that the Government should only make a statement on the lines discussed if there was a chance that it would end the hunger strike. The statement would therefore have to be shown to the PIRA before it was made: otherwise there was no possibility that they would allow an end to the hunger strike. If successful, the statement would also have to be made within the next 24 hours, or at least before the death of McDonnell. The Prime Minister said that your Secretary of State should reconsider his draft statement in the light of the comments made at the meeting and of any statement by the ICJP. His statement should say that the Government was willing to continue with its programme of improvement of prison conditions if the hunger strike were called off. It should offer no concessions on association. On work, it could offer only marginal improvements and must maintain the principle that the prison Governor had the final decision on what work was acceptable. In short, it could repeat your Secretary of State's comments on work and association in his statement of 30 June. On clothes, the statement could offer to put all men in Northern Ireland prisons on to the same basis as the female prisoners in Armagh. Your Secretary of State should clear his draft with the Prime Minister before communicating it to the PIRA later that night. It should be communicated to the PIRA on the basis that it would only be made public if they indicated that the hunger strike would be called off. If the PIRA could not accept it, the Government would either deny any knowledge of it or consider whether it should be issued as a response to the ICJP.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries to those present at the meeting, and to David Wright (Cabinet Office).

*Yours
Wilkie Rickett*

Stephen Boys-Smith, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.