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Prime Minister

'H' decided on ~~now~~ no concessions over the hunger strike.

This should be mentioned at Cabinet. It is a serious issue - perhaps a separate item rather than an afterthought to Parliamentary Affairs?

MA 21/x

PRIME MINISTER

Yes not

HUNGER STRIKE AT THE MAZE PRISON

At this morning's meeting of H Committee the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland confirmed that seven I.R.A. prisoners at the Maze Prison were almost certain to begin a hunger strike on 27th October and that both they and others who might start a similar strike a little later were sufficiently determined to continue the strike until they died. The hunger strike would be accompanied by an orchestrated campaign of support throughout Ireland and abroad.

The Committee were unanimous in supporting the view of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that the Government could not compromise on the principle of granting political status to the prisoners concerned, and that the aim must be to sustain the improving security position. Against that background we considered very carefully the advantages and disadvantages of the Government making any move in advance of the strike on the lines discussed in the Secretary of State's paper H(80) 74.

We noted that of the five points listed in paragraph 5 of that paper the first three presented no difficulties if and when the prisoners were willing to conform to the normal rules, and agreed that no concession should be made on the requirement for prisoners to work. Discussion therefore centred on the possible announcement of a change in policy whereby all prisoners in Northern Ireland who conformed to general prison rules would, in the course of time, be issued with a more varied range of civilian-type clothing. Most of the Committee, though not all, felt that it would not be sensible for

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the Government to offer such a change of policy now. Since neither I nor the Secretary of State for Scotland could contemplate an early similar change being made for Great Britain, it could not convincingly be represented as a general measure of penal reform. It was the more likely therefore to be seen as a concession to the prisoners made only because of the imminence of the hunger strike. This does not mean, however, that the possibility of making such a concession or of offering a wide review of prison regimes in Northern Ireland may not be useful cards to play as events develop.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will, if you agree, report the latest position to Cabinet on Thursday, when he will have had the benefit of formal advice from the Chief Constable. He had it in mind, subject to colleagues' agreement, to make a full statement of the Government's position on Friday in Northern Ireland and to make a statement to the House of Commons when it resumes on Monday, 27th October.

At the same time, I am likely myself to have to make a statement about the dispute with the Prison Officers' Association in England and Wales. Both matters could, if you agree, be raised under "Parliamentary Affairs" at Cabinet or, alternatively, there could be a separate item on the agenda.

I am copying this minute to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to our other Cabinet colleagues, to the Attorney General and the Minister of Transport, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

21. *Wells*
21. October 1980

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