

PRIME MINISTER

mf

cc. Mr. Gow
Mr. Alexander

Crumlin Road Prison Escape

I attach a copy of Mr. Atkins' statement.

Supplementaries followed the predictable pattern for Northern Ireland. Mr. Concannon was broadly content to rest on the enquiry. Irish Members were more concerned about individual pieces of evidence about lax security in the prison. Mr. Molyneaux claimed that one of the arrested solicitors had been interned previously for IRA activities. Mr. Paisley went several steps better by explaining the wicked deeds of various relatives of the said solicitor - one of whom was apparently even now functioning as an election agent for Mr. Haughey: this, Mr. Paisley believed, made it unlikely that the escapees would be properly pursued by the authorities in the Republic. Mr. Paisley had himself "served in the prison" twice, and could confirm from personal experience that clergymen and solicitors were not searched on entry.

Gerry Fitt, in his most statesmanlike mood, implored people to avoid making the escapees folk heroes, and recounted the horror of the murder of Captain Westmacott.

There were other expressions of concern about the situation revealed by the escape, and Mr. Atkins undertook to keep the House informed of the outcome of Mr. Pearce's enquiry. At one point, there were also a series of Points of Order - initially John Biggs-Davison, later supported by Michael Foot - suggesting that the competitive revelations of Mr. Molyneaux and Mr. Paisley were likely to prejudice the prospects of a fair trial for the solicitor whose connections they were listing. The Speaker was not persuaded of the point - to the surprise of the rest of the House, I believe.

MAJ

11 June 1981

STATEMENT - ESCAPE FROM HM PRISON BELFAST - 11 JUNE 1981

I will, with permission Mr Speaker, make a statement on the escape from HM Prison Belfast. Eight prisoners escaped from HM Prison Belfast yesterday afternoon at about 4.15pm. All of them were at the time on remand. The trial of seven of them had already ended, and the judge is expected to deliver his judgment tomorrow. Four of those were charged with the murder of an Army officer, Captain Westmacott, who was killed when the Army and police surrounded a house in the Antrim Road, Belfast, in May 1980. Two were charged with the murder, in April 1980, of Police Constable Magill. The seventh man, Ryan, was charged with the murder of an RUC constable in 1976 and a former member of the UDR in 1978. The eighth man, Gerard Sloan, was charged with being in possession of explosive. The trial in this latter case had not yet begun.

The escape began while the eight prisoners were in discussion with three solicitors in three separate groups, each group in a cubicle in the visiting room which is some 15 yards inside the main gate of the prison. The prisoners produced 3 pistols. Four prison officers were forced to hand over their uniforms, which were put on by four of the escaping prisoners. The escapers then made their way to the main gate of the prison, severely injuring a prison officer who attempted to prevent them from leaving the visiting area. The prison officer was struck on the head, and is in hospital with

a suspected fractured skull.

At the main gate, prison officers on duty were forced at gunpoint to allow the prisoners to leave. The eight prisoners then went immediately to two cars which were apparently waiting for them. Up to this point they had not discharged firearms. The alarm was raised at the main gate, alerting other prison officers, and the Army and the police. At least one shot was fired by the escapers: fire was returned by Army and the police. Nobody appears to have been hit. The two vehicles were abandoned not far away, and it appears that the prisoners then hi-jacked other vehicles to continue their escape.

The police and army mounted a large-scale operation immediately after the escape. This operation is continuing, but so far none of the escaped prisoners has been arrested.

Immediately after the escape, 2 solicitors and one solicitor's apprentice were arrested and are still in police custody, as are two other men, subsequently arrested in connection with the escape.

I regard the escape of any prisoners, and especially the escape of men subject to such serious charges, as a matter of the greatest concern. At my request, my rt hon Friend the Home Secretary, has made available Mr W H Pearce CBE, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

to conduct an urgent enquiry into security arrangements at the prison relevant to the escape of these eight men and to report to me. The enquiry will begin immediately.