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to Hughes Strickland  
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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE NEED FOR MOVEMENT

1. I am today circulating to my colleagues on OD two papers (OD(81)32 and 33) for discussion next week. One deals with the political situation in Northern Ireland; the other with the prisons. The two groups of problems, although set out separately, are closely inter-related. Each, within its own field, proposes a new development in the policies we have pursued so far. It seemed to me essential that, in reading these papers, my colleagues should have before them an explanation of why I think the time for movement has now come.

2. On politics, we have said for two years, in two White Papers, that we were looking for the agreement of the local parties, and could not move without that agreement - any move had to be "acceptable" to both sides of the community. I am now convinced:

- (a) that the prospects of such agreement, never good, have receded in recent months;
- (b) that we cannot stand still for the remainder of this Parliament on political development in the North while continuing to pursue - as we are committed to doing - the development of relations with Dublin; and
- (c) that we must therefore contemplate taking a unilateral step now, looking for support to Westminster.

3. On prisons, we have over the last eight months stood firm against the hunger strikers and their demands. And I am quite clear that on our points of principle (no differentiation; and no loss of control) we must continue as firm as ever.

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But there is both room and, I believe, need for movement. I am therefore proposing the setting up of a Committee which we shall certainly need before long to advise us on some difficult medium and long-term problems which we face, and which could also, if we so choose, be charged with the more urgent role of providing a possible way of easing the short-term impasse.

4. These two moves are linked. We have not been wrong in seeking the agreement of local political parties to constitutional change. We have certainly not been wrong in standing firm on the prisons issue. But:

- (i) I believe there is increasingly a mood in the country that if we cannot "do something" about "the Northern Ireland problem", we should consider withdrawal. The message which I get loud and clear from every contact I have with broad public and political opinion - including particularly backbench Conservative opinion relayed by the officers of the Party's Northern Ireland Committee - is that the time has come for us to be seen to be making moves, on both fronts, political and prisons, since they reinforce each other. We are not winning friends by doing nothing.
- (ii) On the political front it is clear from all our efforts of the past two years that "acceptability" is a chimera. We were right to try to find it. We should be foolish to refuse to acknowledge that it is not to be found. If by the next election we wish to be seen to have made some progress, we must be bold enough to proclaim and pursue a course in spite of local disagreement.

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(iii) On prisons, apart from the longer term problems (which we have to face in any case), I now feel strongly that a continuing, apparently endless, series of deaths from hunger strikes will cumulatively lose us both the catholic population of Northern Ireland and the sympathy of the world opinion. We may outface the hunger strikers; but we shall pay a heavy price for doing so. In my view we must be seen at least to have tried to facilitate a lessening of tension, perhaps leading to a way of ending the strikes. In the perception of the outside world the line between firmness and intransigence is a narrow one.

5. With these considerations in mind I propose in the papers the appointment of some kind of Departmental Committee to consider and advise on the problems in NI prisons. On politics, it is as impracticable as ever to set up without the agreement of the parties any new body exercising executive powers. I am therefore proposing that we should establish an elected advisory body, being an arrangement which we could, if necessary, impose !

6. If the approach to political development proposed in the paper is approved by OD, we have to decide how much I should say in the Renewal Debate in early July before I have completed talks with the local parties. I propose to make it clear in my speech that HMG is persuaded that Northern Ireland needs now some development on the political front; that I have in train discussions with the local political leaders so that I can learn their present thinking; that we recognise that, since a consensus on the way ahead may well be lacking, we shall have press ahead with it; and that we shall publish a White Paper in the autumn with our proposals, to give Westminster and GB opinion generally the

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opportunity to express its view on future development. This would be going a long way towards indicating that HMG will publish and carry forward proposals in the autumn irrespective of the parties' reactions; while avoiding any appearance that the talks with the parties would be a mere charade.

7. I am sending copies of this minute to the other members of OD and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of the initials "H.A." in a cursive style.

H.A.

12 June 1981

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