

SECRET



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**SUBJECT**

MOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD TO CC(81)26<sup>th</sup> CONCS.

THURS 2nd JULY 1981

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MOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD  
TO  
CC(81) 26th CONCLUSIONS

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NORTHERN  
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At the end of the Cabinet's meeting on 2 July (CC(81) 26th Conclusions) there was an informal discussion of the situation relating to Northern Ireland, during which the following points were made:-

a. There were increasingly disturbing signs of an erosion of international confidence in British policy in the light of the continuing hunger strike at the Maze Prison. The difficulties which this would cause for the Government when further hunger strikers began to die should not be underestimated; they would compound what would in any case be an extremely serious situation in terms of security and public order. The problem was no longer solely one of ensuring that the Government's stance was properly understood. There was a real need to avoid that stance being condemned, however unfairly, as inflexible. On the other hand, any gesture to reduce the appearance of inflexibility was liable to be interpreted, both by the Protestant community and by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), as a prelude to capitulation. It was in any case not easy to see what gesture might be possible. Ideally some independent body should be invited to satisfy itself, and certify publicly, that the Government's attitude on the prison regime was both humane and reasonable. But the European Commission for Human Rights had made clear that they were not willing to play any role in the absence of any specific complaint. The Government could not of course make such a complaint against themselves; the prisoners were not prepared to do so; and though another Government could in theory fill the gap it was questionable whether it would be wise to try to stimulate this. It was encouraging that the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) had welcomed the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's recent statement on the prison regime. Their continuing involvement might prove helpful, though it would be undesirable that they should be allowed to assume the role of intermediary between the strikers and the Government. But it could not alter the underlying problem, which was becoming increasingly clear: the hunger strikers' real aim was not to alter prison conditions but to bring about a British withdrawal from the Province and the unification of Ireland.



b. The difficulty of the Government's position seemed certain to be increased by the evolving Opposition attitude towards Irish unity as an ultimate objective. The expected speech by Mr James Callaghan in the Northern Ireland debate later that day might prove to be a watershed. As a former Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition his views would carry special weight. He had already indicated privately that he thought the British "guarantee" should apply not to Northern Ireland as a territory but to its inhabitants; the territory should become independent, with transitional arrangements under which British troops and British financial assistance would remain available for a limited period; but those of its inhabitants who wanted to remain citizens of the United Kingdom should be guaranteed the right to do so. It was not certain that he would be as explicit as this in his forthcoming speech. But the whole context of the current British debate about Northern Ireland would be altered if the question he addressed was not whether British policy was winning or losing in the struggle there, but whether it was a struggle in which Britain ought any longer to be involved at all. His views might well receive massive support from public opinion in Britain, where there was already a widespread feeling in favour of British withdrawal. It could be argued, indeed, that the watershed was already passed. The decisive moment had been the Fermanagh by-election, and the choice of an imprisoned terrorist hunger striker to represent a Northern Irish constituency at Westminster. Many people in Britain now believed that a settlement of the complex problems of the area would be more easily reached by the Irish on their own and that continued British involvement could only mean the futile sacrifice of further British lives.

c. Whatever the state of British opinion, withdrawal would not be an easy proposition for any Government. Civil war and massive bloodshed were likely to be the immediate result in Northern Ireland, and the trouble could easily spread to the large Irish communities in some major cities in Great Britain. In any case, the present guarantee to the Province was enshrined in statute and could only be modified by new legislation. The passage of this would be an occasion for turbulence as well as controversy. Even the suggestion of a withdrawal could lead to serious unrest in Western Scotland.

d. Since the immediate problem was how to avoid a new series of deaths of hunger strikers, it was for consideration whether they could not be kept alive by compulsory feeding. If done intravenously by modern methods this should not involve the violent scenes associated with the forcible feeding of hunger striking prisoners in the past. On the other hand, it was uncertain whether the prison doctors would be willing to co-operate; and if intravenous feeding led to all the protesting prisoners coming out on hunger strike the authorities would be faced with the enormous task of sustaining them by such methods indefinitely. In any case, the implications for the running of prisons elsewhere in the United Kingdom would need to be carefully weighed. The decision by the Labour Government of the day to abandon forcible feeding had been taken with the full support of the Conservative Opposition. The step had been widely welcomed by public opinion both at home and abroad, and had been emulated by a number of other Governments in Europe. Nevertheless the possibility of intravenous feeding deserved serious study. More generally, there was no doubt of the importance of avoiding further hunger strike deaths if at all possible.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that further thought would need to be given to all possible courses of action in regard to Northern Ireland, however difficult or unpalatable. But it would first be necessary to await the outcome of the forthcoming debate in Parliament, and the meeting which the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Alison) was to have with her on 3 July.

The Cabinet -

Took note.

Cabinet Office

7 July 1981