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OA

NIOM(81) 5th MEETING

NOTE OF A MEETING HELD IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE ON FRIDAY 11 SEPTEMBER 1981.

Mr Marshall (Chairman))	
Mr Blelloch )	
Mr Corbett )	
Mr Harrington )	
Mr Burrows )	NIO
Mr Fisher )	
Mr Hall )	
Mr Bates )	
Mr Stephens )	
Mr Miller )	
Mr Jackson )	
Lt Col Bateman )	MOD
Major Langton )	
Major Pheysey )	
Mr Facer	Cabinet Office
Mr Heaton	Home Office

Security

1. Mr Blelloch said that, despite the hunger strikers' deaths and the marching season, public disorder in recent weeks had been at a low level compared with the period following Sands' death. The RUC had taken the leading role in containing it. Terrorism, chiefly in the form of attacks on members of the security forces, but also including a few car bombs, continued at a higher level than in the latter part of 1980. Terrorist groups probably had the capacity to continue activity at this level into the winter. Despite suggestions that Loyalist retaliation was in the offing, no evidence had emerged. There had been no suggestion that the current level of security forces was inadequate; and Mr Miller confirmed that the reduction in the number of Brigade HQs was going ahead as planned.

Hunger Strike

2. Mr Blelloch reminded the meeting that four hunger strikers had been taken off their protest during August by the intervention of their families (- in one case the intervention may have been prompted by the striker himself); and that INLA had said that it was scaling down its involvement. The next striker (McCloskey),

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an INLA member, was also expected to be taken off. This was obviously a very important development as it made it easier for other families to take the same step. However, it was too early to say that the strike was crumbling; in particular, it was important to see whether ex-hunger strikers would resume the strike when they returned to the wings. It was noteworthy that recently selected strikers had tended to come from West Belfast, where pressure could more easily be put on their families; and one striker's parents were dead. In answer to questions from Mr Stephens, Mr Blelloch said that a concession on clothes was most unlikely to end the strike and, unless it did, the help it would give to our overseas image would be very short-lived - past changes in regime had been quickly forgotten by critics. The best policy for the present was to do and say nothing. As to attitudes inside the Maze, Mr Blelloch said that some prisoners were questioning whether the strike was likely to succeed, but there was strong sense of loyalty to those who had died and no shortage of volunteers. The Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross would be available in 2-3 weeks. This might offer an opportunity to bring an end to the strike, depending on its contents.

### Political

3. Mr Marshall reminded the meeting that the Secretary of State had announced the intention of setting up an Advisory Council, and had had preliminary contacts with all the party leaders. The Council would have no executive functions, and was a second-best solution but would provide a forum for local politicians. The proposals had met with little enthusiasm; neither of the Unionist Parties had much of a liking for it and the SDLP had rejected it publicly; it was questionable whether a Council with no SDLP support would be desirable. The timetable had originally envisaged a White Paper soon after the Queen's Speech, but this might slip back.

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Joint Studies

4. Mr Marshall reported that work had been continuing at official level. All the papers but one had been agreed with the Irish and they would go before the Steering Committee of Sir Robert Armstrong and Mr Nally in mid October before a Prime Ministerial meeting, probably in early November. There was great advantage in a further round of studies being agreed; in view of the criticisms of the Government, particularly from overseas, it was most helpful to be seen to stand together with the Irish government, and conduct normal relations with them. On cross-border cooperation, Mr Marshall reported that there had been no sign of any weakening in the Garda's commitment.

Baton Rounds

5. Mr Miller asked whether any action was intended following Porton Down's research into the system used by the RUC. Mr Blelloch explained that the RUC would await the outcome of further tests at Porton, and any comments by the Medical Committee. Although the RUC's system appeared to have some undesirable characteristics, it was not clear that the differences between it and the Army's system were likely to be significant in practice. More important considerations, arguably, were whether the rules of engagement were satisfactory, whether they were obeyed and whether breaches were adequately followed up. Mr Marshall warned that PIRA might well try to use baton rounds as the basis for an anti-RUC propaganda campaign similar to that against interrogation.

Miscellaneous

6. Mr Corbett said that the BBC had approached Number 10 and the NIO inviting participation in a forthcoming edition of 'Panorama'. It had become clear that the Republican participants would be from the extreme and that the moderate voices would not be heard. The invitations had been declined.



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