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Mr Bell

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cc Mr Bloomfield
Dr Quigley
Mr Irvine
Mr Shimeld
Mr Dugdale
Mr Young
Mr Mais
Mr Parkes

THE HUNGER STRIKE

1. Public interest in the second hunger strike still seems to be at a satisfactorily low level. However, it seemed to me in retrospect a weakness of our arrangements last autumn that NI Permanent Secretaries were not briefed from time to time on where matters stood. As Sands' condition deteriorates public interest will no doubt begin to be aroused. Against that time you and copy addressees might find it helpful to have a copy of the notes (Annex 1) that we prepared for junior Ministers so that they could deal with any questions that might arise. I also attach copies of the first ~~b3c~~ of the detailed situation reports which are issued by Prisons Department (Annex 2). Future copies of these will be sent to you as they emerge: and I will have Annex 1 and its accompanying material updated as the situation develops.

2. I would, of course, be happy to field any questions, if that would be helpful, under Other Business at PCCs.

J N HIBBLELOCH
20 March 1981

H-BLOCKS : SPEAKING NOTES FOR JUNIOR MINISTERS

WHY HAS BOBBY SANDS GONE ON
A NEW HUNGER STRIKE?

On 1 March, one of the Maze prisoners, Bobby Sands, refused food and declared himself to be on hunger strike. A statement attributed to the prisoners said that this action was being taken in support of their demand for political status.

WHAT DOES "POLITICAL STATUS"
MEAN?

Two things. First, it is a demand for Government to concede that crimes committed for alleged political motives are somehow different from other criminal acts. Second, that prisoners convicted for such crimes should enjoy a prison regime different from that applied to other "non-political" prisoners. Hence the "5 demands" for:

1. The right not to wear prison uniform.
2. The right not to do prison work.
3. Freedom of association.
4. The right to organise recreational facilities, to one weekly visit, to one weekly letter in and out and one food parcel a week.
5. Restoration of all the remission lost as a consequence of participation in the "blanket" and/or "dirty" protests.

The present Northern Ireland prison regime already provides for all prisoners some of the things covered in the 5 demands. [For details, see Secretary of State's statement of 4 December 1980 (attached)]. By hunger striking, the protesters seek to force a change in that regime which, if conceded, would go far to give them control over their lives in prison.

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WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT'S REACTION TO THE OTHER PRISONERS' DECISION TO END THE "DIRTY PROTEST"?

The Government welcomes the decision by the prisoners to end the degrading conditions which they have been imposing upon themselves. It is however disappointed that the prisoners have indicated that they are only doing so in support of demands for changes in the prison regime which would give effect to their demand for political status.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE PRISONERS WHO ENDED THE "DIRTY PROTEST"?

439 prisoners who were taking part in the protest in Maze and Armagh Prisons have stopped fouling their cells. All male prisoners have been moved to clean accommodation and provided with clean bedding. The 28 women prisoners in Armagh have been moved to clean cells and in their case provided with furniture as well as bedding.

WHAT IS THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT POSITION?

The Government's position remains as set out in the comprehensive statement issued on 4 December last year.

It will not concede the demand for political status or recognise that there are crimes which, because they are claimed to be committed for political motives, are in some way less culpable.

It will not concede that there should be, within the normal NI prison regime, a special set of conditions for a particular group of prisoners.

It remains committed to the maintenance and improvement, on humanitarian grounds, of the NI prison regime.

WILL THE GOVERNMENT STAND FIRM IN ITS REFUSAL TO CONCEDE THE DEMAND FOR POLITICAL STATUS?

The claim for political status has been rejected in clear terms by the European Commission on Human Rights and by successive British Governments. In his statement of 3 March, the

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WAS THERE A DEAL TO END THE FIRST HUNGER STRIKE?

Secretary of State again emphasised that the Government would not give way on the issue of political status under pressure of further protest action, whatever form this takes and whether it is inside or outside the prisons. Political status is not, and never will be, on offer. The Prime Minister made this very clear on 5 March.

WHAT WENT WRONG IN JANUARY?

Categorically not. When the hunger strikers ended their protest on 18 December they had all been made aware of the terms of the Secretary of State's statement of 4 December which spelt out clearly what would be open to them if they moved from protest to a fully conforming regime. Nothing has been added to that statement and nothing taken away.

On 18 December all protesting prisoners were given a note [copy attached] describing what would happen when the protests ended. When, in January, it had become clear that the ending of the hunger strike had not, as we had hoped, led to an unwinding of the protests, the prison authorities themselves initiated the process of winding down by moving, in stages, a total of 96 prisoners into clean and furnished cells. On 23 January, 20 of these protesters indicated that they wished to be regarded as "non-protesting prisoners". But they did so in terms which made it perfectly clear that they were seeking to establish a regime which gave them in substance the different "political" status sought by the hunger strikers: in particular they rejected the requirement to do any work outside their wings. That being so, they were not, as they had asked, issued with their own leisure clothing since the wearing of the latter is a privilege available only to conforming

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prisoners for wear outside working hours. The prisoners' reaction to this on the evening of 27 January was for all 96 to smash up their furniture and damage their cells.