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Your reference

Our reference VM 7/1/4

Date 11 February 1976

Dear Information Officer

FRANK STAGG

1. With reference to Guidance No 18 of 22 January 1976 we have prepared the attached background paper which we think may be of use for non-attributable briefing in answering enquiries.

Yours ever

Information Research Department

RESTRICTED

February, 1976

THE CASE OF FRANCIS STAGG

On November 1, 1973, Francis Stagg was sentenced at Birmingham Crown Court to 10 years' imprisonment on charges of conspiring to commit arson; conspiring to commit criminal damage; and of taking part in the control and management of the Coventry unit of the IRA "for the purpose of enabling its members to be employed in the use of physical force in promoting a political object". Three co-defendants (Father Patrick Fell, Anthony Lynch and Thomas Rush) also received jail sentences.

Stagg, who came originally from Co. Mayo but had lived in England since 1959, worked for Northern Relief, a fund-raising organisation, and was a member of the Provisional Sinn Fein. Stagg was said in court to be commanding officer of the Coventry IRA unit and Father Fell his deputy and intelligence officer. Stagg claimed that he had marked installations on a map of Coventry as an example of the type of places liable to be attacked in a "Doomsday situation". Targets were said to include public buildings, major factories and public undertakings.

First hunger-strike: March-June, 1974

Stagg began the first of four hunger strikes on March 30, 1974, in Albany Prison, Isle of Wight. Michael Gaughan, serving seven years for armed robbery, and several others, including Dolours and Marian Price, were also on hunger strike. Both Stagg and Gaughan were force fed. On April 10, Stagg and two others (Gaughan and Paul Holmes) were moved to the hospital wing at Parkhurst Prison, where Gaughan died of pneumonia on June 3. Stagg gave up the protest on June 8 after a visit from Mrs Brendan Magill, wife of the then Provisional Sinn Fein leader in Britain. It was later reported that he had abandoned his hunger strike "on direct orders from the Republican movement" (*The Guardian*, October 28, 1974).

*On July 17 the Home Secretary announced that in future there would be no force-feeding in British prisons.*

Second hunger-strike: October-November, 1974

In July, 1974, Stagg was moved to Long Lartin, a top security prison near Evesham, which was nearer his Coventry home. He was said to be disillusioned and to feel that he had achieved nothing from his protest (*The Guardian*, October 28, 1974). But he began a new hunger strike on October 6, again in protest at prison treatment (he complained of strip searches before and after each visit), ending it on November 5.

Third hunger-strike: February, 1975

Stagg began a third hunger strike on February 10, 1975, apparently in sympathy with IRA prisoners on hunger strike at Portlaoise Prison in the Irish Republic. He was moved to Wakefield Prison, which has a larger hospital and better medical equipment than Long Lartin, and ended this protest on February 21.

Fourth hunger-strike: from December, 1975

Stagg's fourth hunger strike began on December 13, 1975, when he joined other Irish hunger strikers. A Provisional Sinn Fein spokesman said the strikes were part of a campaign for IRA prisoners to be "repatriated" to Northern Ireland. On December 30, a message telephoned to Dublin - apparently from the Republican movement in Britain - warned: "Unless Frank Stagg's demands are met and he is repatriated to a Northern Ireland jail by January 3, 1976, extreme elements of the Republican movement will mount a ruthless and terrifying campaign in major British cities. We have active service units already on alert in all parts of the country and all the means for such a campaign" (*Irish Press*, December 31, 1975).

An Irish lawyer, Michael Conneely, who saw Stagg early in January, 1976, told a Press conference in Dublin that Stagg demanded a written undertaking that he would not be returned to solitary confinement and that he would not be asked to do prison work. His demand for repatriation to the North was secondary.

In mid-January a Provisional spokesman said: "If he dies every honour that can be paid will be paid" but the Provisionals were reported to be dismayed at the "indifference of the British and Irish public" (*Irish Press*, January 21). He was reported to have received the Last Rites of the Catholic Church on January 20, and a senior member of Provisional Sinn Fein was allowed to visit him. On January 22, a member of Sinn Fein said in Wakefield there was "no question of ordering Stagg off his hunger strike" (*Irish Press*, January 23) and by the end of the month Provisional sources confirmed preparations for an extensive campaign of violence in the event of Stagg's death (*Irish Times*, January 30).

A Home Office statement on January 27 pointed out that since Stagg had no known associations with Northern Ireland there was no reasonable basis for his transfer. But he had been told he could be transferred, on his recovery, to a prison nearer his home and wife in Coventry. It had also been made clear to him that "political status" does not exist in British prisons.

At the beginning of February, the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Leeds, Rt. Rev. Gerald Moverley, instructed the prison chaplain that Stagg should not have Mass said in his cell. He explained: "The usual place for the celebration of Mass is a church or a chapel... I am satisfied that Frank Stagg is receiving excellent attention both from the prison authorities and from the Chaplain. There is no pastoral necessity for Mass to be celebrated in his sick room" (*Irish News*, February 2).

IRA threats

During a demonstration in Londonderry on February 1, Kevin Agnew of the Provisional Sinn Fein warned that British cities had "seen nothing compared to what they will get ... if Stagg dies" (*Irish Press*, February 2). But Stagg's sister, Mrs Veronica Phillips, who lives in Coventry, attacked attempts to capitalise on her brother's fast. She said: "We have to live here and a lot of Irish people, particularly in Coventry, are really frightened by this kind of talk... We disown all talk of bombing campaigns or violence in Ireland or in Britain" (*Irish News*, February 3).

A brother, Mr Emmet Stagg, declared: "If Frank dies the responsibility will rest squarely on the Provisional leadership and nobody else" (*Irish Times*, February 5).

Bishop Edward Daly of Derry, who at the end of January had written to the British Government asking for the transfer of the hunger strikers to Northern Ireland, was reported in the *Irish Times* (February 7, 1976) to have changed his mind. The Bishop said that a great deal of propaganda had been made out of the hunger strike, and he believed Stagg was more valuable to the Provisionals dead than alive.

The Provisionals issued a statement in Belfast on February 5, said to have been made by Stagg himself, in which he declared that "... The leadership of the Provisional movement have never asked me, or told me, to go on hunger strike... [They] have given me every support, they have campaigned vigorously for my just demands, they have given generous financial support to the members of my family who have travelled to Wakefield, London and Europe in the campaign for my demands to be met..." (*Irish Times*, February 6).

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### The hunger strike tradition

The hunger strike tradition dates back to the deaths in 1916 and 1921 of Terence McSwiney and Thomas Ashe who became heroes of the struggle against the British administration in Ireland. By 1939 and 1940, however, the IRA was exploiting the same technique against the government of Dr Eamon de Valera, himself a veteran of the 1916 Rising. De Valera granted concessions to one hunger striker, Patrick McGrath, but "The sequel was to be tragic and worse than de Valera feared... A second hunger strike began some months later and two men, Tony Darcy and Sean McNeela died in consequence in April, 1940... In the following August two detective officers were shot dead in arresting Patrick McGrath and Francis Hart. Both the latter were executed. De Valera felt that six lives were lost because of his giving in when faced with McGrath's hunger strike..." (*Eamon de Valera*, by the Earl of Longford and T P O'Neill, Hutchinson, 1970).

Despite the efforts made to exploit the case of the Price sisters and their accomplices in 1974 (when force feeding was still being practised in British prisons), Provisional IRA hunger strikes in recent years have not aroused widespread public approval. Michael Gaughan, who died in May, 1974, was like Stagg not an ideal subject for a propaganda campaign. He was "adopted" belatedly by the Provisionals in spite of the fact that he was serving a sentence for a robbery carried out without their approval. Also like Stagg, he was not fully supported by his family: "Gaughan's parents did not visit him on the Isle of Wight until he was about to die. His mother was openly hostile to his political involvement..." (*Hibernia*, Dublin, June 21, 1974).

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In the Irish Republic the Provisional IRA leader Sean MacStiofain attracted little sympathy for his hunger strike following his arrest in November, 1973. MacStiofain's eventual decision to abandon the hunger strike (on the orders of the "leadership of the Republican movement") helped to discredit him and the form of protest. Despite extensive propaganda campaigns the political motivation behind subsequent Provisional IRA hunger strikes has been clear. Following a hunger strike in January, 1975, by 12 IRA prisoners in Portlaoise jail, Mr Patrick Cooney, the Irish Minister for Justice, stated: "The genuine humanitarian concern which everyone feels in the presence of hunger strikes was unscrupulously exploited by a politically-motivated propaganda campaign which misrepresented, among other things, the conditions at Portlaoise, depicted as far more severe than in fact they are. This campaign, humanitarian on the surface, was accompanied by threats against the lives of members of the government".

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Despite the efforts made to exploit the case of the Price sisters and their accomplices in 1974 (when force feeding was still being practised in British prisons), Provisional IRA hunger strikes in recent years have not aroused widespread public approval. Michael Goughan, who died in May, 1974, was like Stagg not an ideal subject for a propaganda campaign. He was "adopted" belatedly by the Provisionals in spite of the fact that he was serving a sentence for a robbery carried out without their approval. Also like Stagg, he was not fully supported by his family: "Goughan's parents did not visit him on the life of night until he was about to die. His mother was openly hostile to his political involvement..." (O'Donnell, Dublin, June 21, 1974).