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CONFIDENTIAL

① Mr Bell  
② POL  
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PAB/966/RE

MUFAX TO LONDON.

PS/Secretary of State (I&B) (M)

REACTIONS TO PRISONS STATEMENT

cc: PS/Ministers (I&B) (M)  
PS/PUS (I&B) (M)  
PS/Mr Bell  
Mr Marshall (M)  
Mr Blelloch o/r  
Mr Wyatt  
Mr Doyne-Ditmas  
Mr Buxton  
Mr Palmer  
Mr Harrington (M)  
Mr Chesterton (M)  
Mr Davenport  
Miss MacGlashan  
Mr Jackson  
Mr R Templeton

1. I attach an assessment of the reactions we have heard so far to the statement made by the Secretary of State on 6 October setting out changes to the prisons regime.



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Political Affairs Division

9 October 1981

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REACTIONS TO PRISONS STATEMENT

1. The Secretary of State's 6 October statement on changes to the prisons regime seems to have struck broadly the right note and has been received with widespread relief as an acceptable conclusion to the hunger strike saga.
2. On the Unionist side Dr Paisley predictably tried to exploit the statement to whip up emotive fears of a sell-out to the Provisionals. Mr Molyneaux and other OUP spokesmen echoed this line. Other Unionist politicians uttered ritual expressions of suspicion - although it is worth noting that John McMichael, head of the UDA's political front group, the UDLP, was reported as welcoming reforms "which benefited all prisoners". In private, Unionist politicians have grumbled, but there is little anger in what they have to say and no suggestion that the prison changes are an issue on which they will go to the wall. A number of UUP councillors (and even one or two in the DUP) have privately expressed themselves satisfied with the Government's action and have discounted Paisley's posturing, the Hillsborough walkout etc, as acts of political expediency.
3. Opinion in the majority community at large has been less carping. Most tolerate the announced changes as a reasonable settlement of an issue they are tired of. Though some people express fears that the Government may be on a slippery slope, and regret that we have not rubbed the Provisionals' noses in the dirt, the firmness and charity of the statement have gone some way to defusing latent mistrust. As with Dr Fitzgerald's initiative on the Constitution, this episode demonstrates the unreliability of treating Unionist politicians as an indicator of the real feelings of the majority community.
4. The Catholic community has received the 6 October measures with widespread relief and approbation. Cardinal O Fiaich and Bishop Daly publicly described the statement as welcome and timely (and the latter has commented in private that no reasonable man could have asked for more). Mr Hume described the measures as a positive response to the end of the strike, and the SDLP in general hope that pressure on them from the NHBAC and IIP will now abate. Some local Catholic politicians with H-Block sympathies suspect that further changes in the prisons

may be on the cards, and draw encouragement from Lord Gowrie's promised prison visit and the Government's hints on developing the prison work regime. But their anxiety is not so much to get more for the protestors as to prevent a possibility of a resumption of the hunger strike.

5. Ordinary Catholics are mightily glad that the hunger strike is over. They regard the prison changes as a decent gesture and expect the prisoners to accept them, perhaps after some haggling. If they do not, there will be little sympathy for the protestors, unless the Provisionals can put a persuasive case to the effect that the Government has dragged its feet or reneged on promises. Even then, sympathy will be difficult to arouse; and there would be none whatsoever for a renewal of the hunger strike.

6. In sum, so far so good. But if the idea were to get around that the 6 October changes were merely a first tranche, Protestant grumbling and posturing could well turn to real anger, and we could easily find ourselves under renewed Catholic pressure to "be generous". It is therefore important that we avoid any speculation that there may be more to come.