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THE HUNGER STRIKE: VIEW FROM THE IRISH REPUBLIC

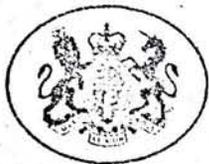
SUMMARY

1. A difficult period in Anglo-Irish relations. Mr Haughey helpful but thought HMG could do more to find apparent concessions. (Paragraphs 1 - 2)
2. Bobby Sands's election to Westminster a shock, as was the election of two H-Block candidates in the June Irish election. (Paragraphs 3 - 5)
3. Dr FitzGerald's hasty and emotional approach led to deteriorating Anglo-Irish relations. The H-Block propaganda campaign built up to a violent demonstration in Dublin which forfeited popular support for the Provos. Later demonstrations against the residence and Defence Attaché's home. (Paragraphs 6 - 10)
4. Dr FitzGerald persuaded that public criticism of HMG not helping him or a solution. With the end of the strike no sign of long-term effect on our relations. But it showed the strength of the appeal to traditional Irish Republican emotions. Our resistance to blackmail understood but the illogical belief remained that we were in part responsible for the deaths. HMG given credit for the way the end of the strike was handled. This stands us in good stead. (Paragraphs 11 - 12)

MH
26/10
① Mr Hopkins
② C.C. Farinfa
B/S of S (B)
B/L. Gounel (CB)
B/Rs (CB)
Mr Marshall
Mr Bellach
Mr Wyatt
Mr Angel
Mr Palmer
Mr. Tink

Mr Mackay
V. interesting. To someone in NIO going to write an account as seen from NIO's viewpoint, I wonder?
SCT
30.10.81

*MOT.
21/10/80*



BRITISH EMBASSY,
DUBLIN.

19 October 1981

The Right Honourable
The Lord Carrington KCMG MC
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
London SW1

My Lord,

THE HUNGER STRIKE: VIEW FROM THE IRISH REPUBLIC

1. The hunger strike which began on 1 March and ended on 3 October must have been one of the most difficult periods in Anglo-Irish relations for many years. There had been much concern in the Republic during the previous strike by seven prisoners which ended on 19 December. No deaths had occurred and it was hoped that the protest might end. But it was not long before the protesting prisoners claimed that they had been tricked into ending the strike and it was clear that another one was on the cards.

2. At this stage Mr Haughey's Fianna Fail Government was still in power and he was as sensitive as anyone to the possible dangers. When it became likely that a strike would start on 1 March I was instructed to give him a message from the Prime Minister reiterating HMG's stand that they could not accept the prisoners' five demands which represented prisoner-of-war or special category status. The message went on to say that HMG's position was that the régime described at the ending of the last hunger strike in December remained available and that we were committed to keeping prison conditions under review from a humanitarian point of view. The Prime Minister hoped that Mr Haughey would appreciate how we saw the situation and that he would reinforce the actions we would be taking to inform those who might have influence on the prisoners. I delivered this message on 26 February and Mr Haughey assured me that he would do what he could to help. But he made clear that he did not think we were using sufficient cunning and dexterity in

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seeming to make concessions without actually doing so and thereby heading off the strike. This attitude was also shared by his successor.

3. The attached chronological table shows the various developments in the hunger strike from 1 March till its end on 3 October. The first landmark - and an unpleasant surprise - was the election of the first hunger striker, Bobby Sands, in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election on 9 April. The election of a convicted prisoner - and one on hunger strike - was something quite new but no-one had yet grasped the enormous propaganda advantage it would give the IRA. Ten days later three Irish Euro-MPs, Neil Blaney, Sile de Valera and Dr John O'Connell, visited Sands and sent a telegram to the Prime Minister asking her to meet them. Mr Haughey asked me to call and said that he was in consequence under pressure to say something and wished to consult us. It was at this stage that he mentioned the possible intervention by the European Commission for Human Rights. He thought that Sands did not wish to die and it was in our interest to devise some formula based on the European Commission to bring him off the fast. It was clear that the Irish were increasingly worried at the effect of the hunger strike in the Republic. On 24 April I gave the Irish a *bout de papier* taking the European Commission ploy a stage further and asking for the Irish Government's cooperation. This was willingly given and Mr Haughey personally persuaded Sands's sister to make a complaint on behalf of her brother which would then formally involve the European Commission. But unfortunately this came to nothing on Sands's refusal to allow her to proceed. He died on 5 May.

4. As I said at the time, the Irish Government were not too alarmed by Sands's death and the general public took it calmly. What did worry us was the prospect of further hunger strikers dying, as they had said they would, at carefully timed intervals. The mood of the Irish Government was that they could ride out two or three deaths but more than that would radically alter the picture.

/By 21 May

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By 21 May three more hunger strikers had died, and the violence in the North following each funeral was having its effect in the South. However, sympathy for the IRA had still not built up to any extent and indeed the murder on 19 May of five British soldiers near Camlough in South Armagh was a tragic reminder of what the realities were.

5. By this time it was clear that - against a worsening economic background - Mr Haughey could not postpone the general election much longer. He had originally intended calling it in February, but the disastrous fire at the Stardust night-club in North Dublin, when 49 people died, and then the hunger strike had disrupted his plans. There was a gap of about six weeks after the first group of hunger strikers died and before the next group reached danger point: so the election was called for 11 June. The election gave the H-Block Committee an opportunity to drum up popular support and they fielded nine candidates in the constituencies they considered most hopeful. It was a shock to Irish opinion - and to us - that they won two seats and gained altogether 42,804 first preference votes. Although the H-Block vote was concentrated in border areas where Republican sentiment had traditionally been strongest (and where Sinn Fein candidates won four seats in 1957, when feeling ran much less high) there is general agreement that a large proportion of their following was young voters expressing admiration for the hunger strikers, disillusion with conventional Irish politics and the bleak employment situation in the Republic.

6. Before the formation of the new Government, Dr FitzGerald, who knew he had a good chance of leading a coalition Government, came round on the evening of Sunday 28 June to see me. He said that if he were successful in forming a Government he would take an early opportunity of visiting London to see the Prime Minister to try and bring the hunger strike to an end. This would be his top priority. This was indeed all too true. Although he did not go to London he sent his Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Kelly, and the Foreign Minister designate, Professor Dooge, to see the

/Lord Privy Seal



Lord Privy Seal and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 10 July. Dr FitzGerald was deeply alarmed by the H-Blocks success in the general election and disturbed by his meetings with the strikers' relatives. He seems to have thought that the two sides were so close that he could bring about an early ending to the strike. But from the time he took office on 30 June until about mid-August, when he adopted a more reasonable approach, his attempts to end the strike were hasty, emotional and, in some cases, contradictory. Earlier in the year Mr Michael O'Leary (now leader of the Labour Party) had told me that in difficult situations in Anglo-Irish affairs, such as the hunger strike, I would always find it easier to deal with a Fianna Fail Government than a coalition one. Again, I fear, all too true. During June and July, when there were frequent demonstrations and marches in Dublin, our relations with the Irish at Government level deteriorated badly, although I am glad to say that our contacts at the official level remained steady and friendly.

7. One event which led to serious disagreement between us and the Irish was the involvement of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace in the hunger strike. The representatives of the Commission, led by Bishop O'Mahony, had had lengthy meetings with Mr Alison and the NIO between 23 June and 8 July. On 9 July they issued a statement to the press implying that HMG had acted in bad faith in its dealings with the Commission and that we had misled them. Dr FitzGerald readily believed their version despite the careful explanations we gave him and he has ever since held us responsible for failing to bring the strike to an end when the Commission had so painstakingly given us the chance to do so. McDonnell's death on 8 July and Hurson's on 13 July marked a new low in our relations and stampeded the Taoiseach into his appeal, through the Irish Ambassador in Washington, to President Reagan to intervene with the Prime Minister. Although most responsible Irish opinion was at this time becoming critical of our handling of the hunger strike, Dr FitzGerald's appeal to the President was widely regarded as foolish.

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8. The second event which served to keep our relations at an unacceptably low level was the Prime Minister's letter of 25 July to the Friends of Ireland in which Dr FitzGerald was quoted as having said that he accepted that the British Government were doing all they could to end the strike. The fact that this reference was accurately based on an "Irish Times" report of what an Irish Government spokesman had said did nothing to diminish Dr FitzGerald's annoyance. He upbraided me for allowing my Government to quote the views of the Irish Government based on misleading press reports and then issued a lengthy statement, quoted extensively in the Irish papers on 29 July, which did nothing to improve the atmosphere. He also wrote a long letter (which in one passage did not square with my first-hand knowledge of what had happened) to the Four Horsemen which gave further ammunition for the media to magnify Irish and British differences. Headlines like "Garret attacks Thatcher" must have given a boost to the H-Block campaign and the hunger strikers. And it was this period - the second half of July - which Mr Haughey had in mind when he criticised Dr FitzGerald in such strong terms to me at the end of September.

9. By the middle of August the first breaks in the hunger strike were becoming apparent and also the public had begun to lose interest. The IRA had lost much support following the violence outside the Embassy on 18 July and Dr FitzGerald had come to realise that his constant carping at the British Government was not helping end the hunger strike and was doing him personally no good. Recently Senator Whitaker told me in confidence that he had written to Dr FitzGerald pointing this out and that he knew he spoke for many of the Irish establishment. The need to maintain a more balanced line, especially in an Anglo-Irish context, must have been high on the agenda of a meeting held at the end of August attended by the Taoiseach, other Ministers and senior officials. The Secretary of the DFA told me that nothing new would emerge from the meeting and I have no doubt this was so. But I am also fairly sure that

/Professor Dooge



Professor Dooge and others must have used the occasion to persuade Dr FitzGerald that a more moderate line was required. At all events, September passed more quietly on the Anglo-Irish front. The Irish Government refrained from comment on the strike and found that life was simpler as a result.

10. Although the strike had gratifyingly little effect on our official contacts or on our personal relationships, we felt the impact of the H-Blocks propaganda campaign and their more active supporters. As tension increased with the approaching death of Sands, the Embassy attracted a picket of H-Blocks supporters who remained by our front gate intermittently for the next five months. Police protection was increased and the cooperation we received throughout the hunger strike from the Garda was always ample to cover any threat. In the event the Embassy only came under active attack on two occasions. On 12 May, the night of Hughes's death, a crowd of about 1000 Dubliners appeared at the gates and threw stones and bottles at the building. After about 20 minutes the Garda sallied forth from the Embassy and dispersed them with a baton charge. Far more serious was the demonstration on 18 July when a major H-Blocks demonstration, with supporters bussed in from Northern Ireland and the provinces, set off for the Embassy from central Dublin. The Garda blocked them at Ballsbridge, a quarter of a mile from the Embassy, and serious fighting started. For 25 minutes the demonstrators pelted the Garda with bricks and other missiles (some with barbed wire and nails attached) until the order was given to disperse them with a baton charge. The rough handling which the Garda gave the demonstrators on this occasion created a protest in the media (perhaps because journalists were amongst those injured by the baton charge) but this attitude was clearly not shared by broader Irish opinion which was outraged at the destruction of property and the deliberate attack on their police force led by people from Northern Ireland. In retrospect, the confrontation at Ballsbridge was clearly a turning point in popular support for the campaign in the South. In the later stages

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of the campaign attention shifted to the houses of members of staff. There were two protest marches to my residence (with posters advertising the marches in central Dublin and saying "Kick Figg out") and the Dun Laoghaire H-Block group organised pickets and marches on the Defence Attaché's house. They also began to take an unhealthy interest in other Embassy housing. The ending of the strike has put a stop to this activity.

11. The hunger strike in the Republic - as in Northern Ireland - used moral blackmail to appeal to traditional Irish Republican emotions: "the past intimidating the present", as one journalist called it. Many Irish people could not tell how their country would react to deaths from the hunger strike partly because they could not be sure of their own reactions. Logically they could not ask us to surrender but emotionally they could not accept a succession of deaths. Hence the appeal to us to show "flexibility", to make changes which would fluff the issue of political status as they had successfully done to end a hunger strike in Port Laoise in 1977. This missed the essence of the problem for us: that the strike had become a political trial of strength, that in the Republic the number of terrorist prisoners is only 15% of the prison population (while in the North it is about 70%) and that in the South the religious and cultural backgrounds of prison warders are the same as those of the prisoners and of the public at large. In the North we have to contend with a cultural and religious difference between warders and Republican prisoners and with a critical Protestant audience outside. While in quieter times an Irish Government might accept that these differences form a serious constraint on our ability to run a prison system in the way they do in the South, they ceased to accept them as the pace hotted up. When the violence flowed down to the South in June and July the Irish Government's pressure on us to end the strike grew in proportion to their fears that they might not be able to control events and that the institutions of the State might collapse. I must say I never shared their fears, but I put this down more to ignorance of the country on my part than to over-anxiety on theirs.



12. How far has the hunger strike affected our relations with the Republic? I should like to say, probably not very much. What we called the "1916 Syndrome" (increasing fury at a succession of deaths for which HMG was held responsible) never developed, though we came close to it in early July until the demonstration and rioting at Ballsbridge showed the opposition in their true colours. For the Republican fringe, the hunger strikers have already entered the litany of martyrs. But while the IRA may gain individual recruits in the Republic from the strike, I do not believe they have extended their area of support beyond the traditional hard-line Republican element which is significant in the border counties (perhaps 10 to 15%) but may only approach 2 to 3% elsewhere in the South. For the majority of Irish people the hunger strike will remain a painful memory. The IRA may attract an increasing share of the blame as emotion fades, but I think it is too soon to forecast how our part will be seen. The speedy and sensitive approach of Mr Prior and Lord Gowrie following the ending of the strike has made a favourable impression in the Republic which should influence the way people view our policy.

13. It is a great relief for everyone that the strike is over, not least for members of this Embassy who have had to suffer the endless picketing and placarding outside our Chancery over so many weeks. And I should like to say that we have had much in mind what our friends and colleagues in Washington, New York, Paris and elsewhere have had to put up with. And finally I should like to thank those in NIO Belfast with whom we had such a long, close and sometimes frenzied cooperation. I hope we don't have to go through it all again. And while we must no doubt expect difficult times ahead we must all hope that they do not take on the dreadful aspect which they did this spring and summer.

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14. I am sending copies of this despatch to the London and Belfast offices of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HM Ambassador at Washington, HM Consul-General, New York, the Head of British Information Services, New York and HM Representatives at UKMIS New York, UKRep Brussels and EC posts.

I have the honour to be
My Lord
Your obedient Servant

Leonard Hill