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National H Block Committee

1. This body, which seems also to have been known as the "National Smash H Block" committee, was set up following a conference in Belfast in October 1979. At this conference, according to an article in An Phoblacht (27.10.79), a Resolution proposed by Gerry Adams (Vice President of Provisional Sinn Féin) and seconded by Tom Hartley (Chairman Belfast Provisional Sinn Féin) was passed which read:

- "(1) This conference fully supports the protest for political status currently being waged by Republican prisoners of war and condemns the British government for its barbaric treatment of prisoners, especially those incarcerated in the H-Blocks at Long Kesh and the women in Armagh Prison.
- (2) This conference supports the proposal to elect a seventeen person H-Block Committee to spearhead a national campaign of publicity and of militant protests in order to force the British government to concede political prisoner status.
- (3) This campaign headed by the Smash H-Block Committee should be oriented towards mobilising national support particularly amongst the organised labour movement, community organisations and cultural organisations and also mobilising international support.
- (4) In furtherance of these aims the committee should meet within a fortnight and organise (i) a campaign which will lead within the coming months to a national Smash H-Block march and rally; (ii) in Dublin, within the next two months, an open conference on the same basis as today's conference in order to elect a Southern-based committee (a sub-committee which will incorporate southern-based members of the national Smash H-Block committee). This sub-committee to be charged with the responsibility of building a support campaign in the twenty-six counties.
- (5) The only body authorised by today's conference to organise protests or meetings in its name is the national Smash H-Block committee. This conference expresses its support for the work done in the local areas by the Relatives Action Committee and urges support for these committees.
- (6) The Smash H-Block committee is instructed (if political status is not then won) to organise another open conference to which it will be accountable, either within or in six-months time. The conference to be held on similar lines to today's conference."

2. On foot of this resolution the National H Block Committee was formed with the stated aims of:

1. The right not to wear prison uniform
2. The right not to do prison work

3. Freedom of association amongst political prisoners
4. The right to organise educational and recreational facilities
5. To have one weekly visit, to receive and send out one letter per week and to receive one parcel per week.

[The position as repeatedly expressed by the British Government in relation to the regime in the H Blocks is as follows:

Protesting prisoners have lost all privileges which are normally allowed to sentenced prisoners. Certain statutory minimum requirements regarding exercise, visits, letters, etc. are however laid down in the N.I. Prison Rules 1954 and these apply to all prisoners including those protesting and cannot be withdrawn by the prison authorities. The statutory minimum privileges which the protesters are allowed include

- 1 letter in and out per month and 1 additional letter in and out in lieu of the monthly statutory visit if this is not taken
- 1 visit per month
- not less than 1 hours exercise per day in the open air, weather permitting
- use of the prison library, including newspapers and access to religious magazines

The privileges that normally apply to prisoners but not to those protestors include:

- Sending of at least 7 letters per month plus receipt of letters in reasonable proportion to those sent
- 3 additional visits per month
- A weekly parcel of reading material, fruit and toilet articles. Special parcels at Christmas, Easter and Halloween
- Non prison clothing of an approved type may be worn for visits and for exercise and recreation periods. (In the case of the protesting prisoners prison clothing must be worn at all times although protesting prisoners may go naked or wear only underclothing when in their blocks and for exercise and to go to the library.)
- The case of the gymnasium and/or playing pitch for about 3 hours a week at exercise periods in addition to normal exercise
- Three hours association every evening (to watch TV etc.). Evening association not allowed to protesting prisoners although they have opportunities for association (which they do not take) during-dining periods etc.

- purchase of items from the prison shop
- the use of a radio set for prisoners serving over 2 years
- the granting of remission for good conduct. (Protesting prisoners lose one day's remission for each day they are in breach of Prison Rules.)

3. While the National Committee has very close ties with the long standing Relatives Action Committee this latter body has been keen to emphasise that it remains a separate committee with a separate structure organised throughout Northern Ireland. While indicating that they would be supporting the activities of the new committee - the RAC has in fact 4 representatives on it - the RAC has stated (Irish News 23.10.79) that it would be maintaining its own campaign of "militant street protests in support of political status".

4. The National Committee would appear to have at least 13 members although there are indications that the number may be higher than this. The members are Mr. Gerry Brannigan and Mrs. Martha McLenaghan of Provisional Sinn Féin, Miriam Daly and Liam Lennoch of the IRSP; Fr. Piaras O Duill from Dublin, Mr. Patrick Finucane and Mr. Gordon Hayes, both solicitors, Mr. Sean Murphy, a teacher, Mr. Joe Stagg of the Irish Civil Rights Action League, Fergus O'Hare and Mairtin MacGoill of the People's Democracy and Leo Wilson of the Association for Legal Justice. According to an article in An Phoblacht (8 December 1979) Mr. Frank Maguire MP and Mrs. Bernadette McAliskey were co-opted on to the committee. Another report (Irish News 22 October 1979) indicated that Mr. Gerry Adams was also appointed to the committee (possibly, though this is not clear, as one of the four representatives of the Relatives' Action Committee).

5. Fr. O Duill is reported (Irish News 22.10.79) as having told the conference in Belfast that every protest against oppression had to have a degree of violence; "the degree of violence is in accordance with the degree of injustice".

6. On 16 December 1979 the National Committee held a conference in the Mansion House in Dublin as "part of a new and determined effort to settle the issue of the H-Blocks". It put forward the five demands agreed in Belfast which were stated to be rights, not privileges. The Dublin conference which was attended by about 400 people, passed resolutions calling for a canvass of potential Republic support on the H Block issue on humanitarian grounds. It also supported a protest march planned for Belfast on 1 January 1980. A sub-committee to co-ordinate action in the Republic was elected and included Mr. George Lynch (P.SF) and Mr. Philip Flynn (LGPSU), Mr. Kieran Campbell (a Galway solicitor), Ms. Christine Carney (LGPSU), Ms. Irene King (Galway), Mr. Kevin O'Connell, Thomas MacAnna, Mr. Kieran Allen (SLP), Mr. Kieran McAnally (a Dublin solicitor), Mr. Ned King (Galway), Fr. Piaras O Duill, who was Chairman of the meeting, Mr. Gordon Hayes, Mr. Joe Stagg, Mr. Niall Lennoch (IRSP) and Mairtin MacGoill (P.D.). The meeting was also addressed by playwright and author Ulick O'Connor.