



PS/Mr Alison

Now see later
minutes J.C. Jackson
11.1.80

SDLP COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE H BLOCKS

1. Michael Canavan has written to the Secretary of State (Flag 'A'), making certain criticisms of the Government's approach to the protest. The letter has been prompted by a visit which Mr Canavan, Dr Hendron and Dr McLean made on 17 November to Eugene McCormick, a dirty protester from H5. Michael Canavan is of course the SDLP spokesman on law and order, Dr Hendron is the newly-appointed Chairman of the party constituency representatives and Dr McLean is a Londonderry SDLP councillor who was mayor of the city a few years ago. McCormick, who comes from Londonderry, is serving a life sentence for murder as well as 4 other sentences for lesser offences.
2. McCormick had asked for the 3 councillors to see him as his monthly statutory visit. You may be interested to know that on leaving the prison the visitors said they had informed the prisoner of the fact that there was little support for the protest in the outside community and that only the prisoners' immediate families really supported them. This realistic appraisal of events seems not to have been fully carried over into the subsequent letter.
3. Given the importance of the 3 men in the current SDLP hierarchy we assume that this is something of a policy statement; it is certainly in keeping with their recent conference motion (see Flag 'B'). Arguably it is further evidence of what Mr Fitt had long asserted - that is, the party could be pushed by republican pressure into a progressively more hostile attitude towards the Government's stand on special category. However PIRA's own normally virulently anti-SDLP stance tends to provide a counter-weight to this tendency and our suggested draft reply is therefore very full and phrased in as uncontentious terms as can be achieved when dealing with the protest.
4. Aside from questions of detail covered in the draft reply, the letter exhibits 2 fundamental misconceptions which are shared by most of our correspondents who recommend concessions for humanitarian reasons. Firstly the issue at stake is not conditions - and PIRA has said so - it is about the right of the terrorist prisoner to dictate the terms of his imprisonment. Secondly as it is the organisation which has chosen the protest as its major current issue in the overall terrorist campaign it is for the organisation to end it. There is no moral or international duty on the Government to make any "first move", particularly when this would unquestionably be taken as a sign of weakness which only a little more immoral pressure could turn into a complete capitulation to their demands.



5. You might wish to consider whether or not Mr Alison would wish to sign the letter, though it is drafted for your own signature. With current political considerations in mind we think there could be merit in a reply from the Minister.

S C Jackson

December 1979