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- Mr Buxton
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- Mr Harrington (M)
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LOCAL EFFECTS OF THE HUNGER STRIKE

1. I attach a paper, based on PAB's contacts in the community, on the social and political costs of the hunger strike. It does not attempt to assess the economic costs (for example to inward investment), nor the consequences for HMG's relations with the Republic or the US. Nor is it designed to be a concealed recommendation that we should change our stance on the "five demands".

2. The picture it paints is not a happy one. Even if the hunger strike were to end tomorrow, its consequences will be with us for a long time to come.

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LOCAL EFFECTS OF THE HUNGER STRIKE

1. The direct financial costs of the hunger strike and its consequences are roughly quantifiable. It is less easy to assess its political and social effects. Of these the most important have been a sharp increase in the influence of the Provisional IRA in Catholic areas, the alienation of much of the minority community in Northern Ireland from Government and the disruption of political life.
2. Minority reactions to the hunger strike are by no means uniform. Middle class Catholics may not be directly affected, but they are concerned at what is happening to their co-religionists. Feelings have run highest in West Belfast, the Bogside/Creggan and localities in which hunger strikers' families live. Even in these areas, surprisingly few (say 10%) seem to take an active concerned interest. Except among the under-20's, where recruiting is said to have prospered, active sympathy for the IRA is remarkably low. Most Catholics condemn them for their obduracy over the hunger strike and for cynical manipulation of the hunger strikers, their families and minority sentiment. They criticise them for bringing trouble onto the streets, and for the wide moral gap between their alleged ideals and their methods. The minority community is conservative and religious, and even in the Falls and Turf Lodge many can see through the Provos' rhetoric to the nasty reality below.
3. Nevertheless, the fate of the hunger strikers arouses atavistic sympathy. Few Catholics remain entirely unaffected. Out of a community of some half-million, nearly all know families with members in the Maze. Many protestors are from decent homes, and their neighbours find it hard to accept that they are the criminals described by "the Brits". The Provos and their friends have played cleverly on Irish history and tradition to show that the strike is the latest phase of a noble cause and that at bottom the British are responsible. Many Catholics, while giving no support to the Provos, find it increasingly difficult to refute this line. They find themselves under increasing tribal pressure at least to acquiesce in a cause they know is wrong. They believe that the Government, far from trying to help them find a way out of their dilemma, is making things worse by demanding a total and humiliating surrender by the hunger strikers and the Provisional leadership. Most dangerous of all, they incline increasingly to the view that the Govt does not understand the dilemma they are in, or care about it,

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or both; and that if Government will not help them, they will soon have no option but to side against the British. This is probably what people mean when they talk of a new "1916 complex", or what John Hume meant when he spoke to the Secretary of State recently about a possible coming "explosion".

4. This is however for the future. The effects of the strike so far are bad enough. The Provos and INLA have gained a new batch of recruits. The feeling of alienation, bitterness and frustration we detected in Catholic areas in May has grown steadily stronger. People are becoming anti-British and less ready to give the system their support.

5. The Provisionals and their allies have succeeded in exploiting this background. They have engineered confrontations with the Security Forces in which the latter have inevitably made mistakes. These have been used in order to engineer further confrontations, on the familiar pattern of the early 1970s. The consequence is a widespread distrust of the RUC, and outright contempt and hostility for the Army, in particular the UDR. Because of this public hostility to the security forces, the Provisionals and their friends have been able to establish a hold in parts of the community, not least by threats and intimidation. They are unpopular, and people resist them strongly- especially the clergy. But they are there.

6. Minority politics have been seriously disrupted. The local elections showed a swing of opinion in rural areas to 'green' parties like the IIP, and a swing in West Belfast towards candidates standing on an H-Block ticket. This process has continued. The IIP have withdrawn from politics until the strike is over. Though the SDLP have so far resisted pressure to do likewise, they are losing members and influence to their 'greener' rivals and have been brought to decide (rightly or wrongly) to opt out of the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election. On the Nationalist side, the Provos and their allies are making the running and outflanking the moderates.

7. At the same time, the gap between the communities has widened. Catholics are retreating in upon themselves. Many Protestants were dismayed at Sands' election, and are angry at Catholic sympathy for the hunger strikers and at what they see as the treachery of minority

politicians who trim to 'green' pressure while the IRA murder *campaign* continues. The increased polarisation reflected in the local election results in May has led to a sharper sectarian divide and a sharper tone in many District Councils. The prospect of agreement on the political future of Northern Ireland seems further off than ever. The Government's plan for a new Northern Ireland Council seems unlikely to get off the ground: the SDLP have said they will not take part in present circumstances, and OUP opposition to it has hardened. Even the Alliance Party are depressed and wary of taking part. In this atmosphere the hunger strike has become a test of the Government's credibility. While it "does nothing" to resolve the issue, its standing and the standing of Catholic moderates will continue to decline. On the other hand, any movement on the Government's part is apt to be seen as a sign of weakness of resolve to maintain law and order and uphold the Union.

8. Many people throughout the Province believe that public morale is at an all-time low. Until the Spring there was guarded optimism about the future. The hunger strike has revealed that attitudes are as entrenched as ever. It has coincided with a sharp increase in unemployment. There is now deep uncertainty and doubt in all parts of the community, and no light at the end of the tunnel. For the moment this mood is masked by summer weather and holidays; the mask could slip rapidly in the autumn.

9. The end of the hunger strike will of course bring an immediate improvement. Pressure on the minority will be sharply reduced as the Provos' grip on minority life and politics loosens. But it will take a considerable time for fences to be mended between the communities, and between the minority and the Government. Resentment at Government 'intransigence' over the hunger strike, and at the security forces' activities in West Belfast, will take a long time to clear. A new generation of children has been infected with rampant Anglophobia. New heroes and myths have been created, and new wounds opened which will take years to heal. For their part Protestants will not easily forgive or forget Sands' election or the trimming statements by Catholic leaders, lay and clerical. And whatever the circumstances in which the hunger strike ends, Protestants are likely to find some confirmation of their suspicions that the IRA have won something.