

E.R.

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DESKBY 2.30pm

MR BUXTON - M

cc PS/S of S - M
PS/PUS - M
PS/Mr Bell
Mr Marshall - M
Miss Kelley - M
Mr Burns
Mr Wyatt
Mr Moriarty - M
Mr Ranson
Mr Gilliland
Mr Jackson
Mr Corbett - M
Mr Palmer -
Mr BAREY

PM/TAOISEACH MEETING

I attach Points to Make and a Background Note on the hunger strike. I am sorry to have failed to meet your deadline.

R. Duffy

for J N H BLELLOCH
26 November 1980

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HUNGER STRIKE AT HMP MAZE : BACKGROUND NOTE

Since October 27 seven prisoners at HMP Maze have been on hunger strike. They are taking water and salt but refusing all food: otherwise they are co-operating with the prison authorities. They are examined medically every day and though they have lost up to a stone in weight, their condition at the moment gives no cause for anxiety.

The prisoners have said that they want political status and the satisfaction of their five demands (own clothing, no prison work, free association, restoration of lost remission and visits, parcels, etc) and that they will settle for nothing less. Political status would legitimise, and thus be an enormous boost to, a PIRA campaign which has been steadily losing ground both to the security forces and among the minority community in Northern Ireland on which it relies for support. The "five demands" are simply the physical expression of that status; the resulting regime would be that of a prisoner-of-war camp.

What real attitudes are is another matter. There is certainly division among the campaign organisers: some at least who may have opposed the strike before it started may now want it carried through to the bitter end as the best way of getting propaganda from it, notwithstanding the inhibiting effect which the strike has on the conduct of PIRA's campaign. The prisoners' determination, on the other hand, may weaken

does their condition. We are watching for signs of this. In the meantime, the right position for HMG must be to continue to stand firm on its declared position, and to be seen to be doing so.

Mr Haughey's own position was examined in the Dail on 25 November. He said then that political status "should not be an issue" and that a solution "lay somewhere in the area of an adjustment to the prison rules or their implementation". It is not clear what kind of "adjustment" was in mind but one possibility would be the introduction of a regime similar to that followed in Port Laoise Prison where the Irish Government hold their "subversives". There the prisoners may wear their own clothing as they may in all Irish prisons: outside Port Laoise some prisoners do in fact still prefer prison uniform. "Subversives" are not required to work whereas other prisoners are: and their daily timetable allows more, though not wholly free, association than elsewhere. If this comes up, two points might be made. First we can not re-introduce in Northern Ireland a dual prison regime, the choice depending on the alleged motive for the crime for which a man is convicted. That element of the Port Laoise solution is simply not available under HMG's policy of pursuing terrorism as crime under the law. Second, it would simply not be acceptable to a community that has suffered so much from terrorism to extend a Port Laoise solution to all convicted prisoners in Northern Ireland when some three-quarters of the prison population have paramilitary affiliations of one kind

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or another as compared with ^{the} 15 per cent of the Irish total represented by the "subversives" in Port Laoise. Evolution of the prison regime on humanitarian lines is a different matter: HMG has proved its determination to pursue this but it has had no effect whatever to date on the attitude of the protesting prisoners. The hunger strike itself has blocked any further progress that it might otherwise have been thought right to make.

Irish officials when in Belfast on 17 November touched on the possibility of "mediation" by the Irish Government. It received no encouragement and will, presumably not therefore be raised.

Mr Haughey will no doubt not want to be seen to be drawn much beyond his position as at 25 November as a consequence of his talks with the Prime Minister. If so, there is no point in seeking outright condemnation on his part of the claim for political status. He could be pressed, however, to lend his voice to those that have already spoken out against the hunger strike as such, and against the strike becoming the focus for fresh inter-sectarian violence.

POINTS TO MAKE

The hunger strikers have said they want political status and a prison regime to go with it. HMG have made it clear that they will not concede this and it is essential that the position should be clearly understood. The strike itself is wrong and many have spoken out against it. It is being exploited to foment inter-sectarian conflict. HMG will continue to speak out against this. Looks to the support of all responsible leaders of opinion.

On the evidence available, the strike is not about marginal changes in the prison regime. Where these are genuinely justified on humanitarian grounds the Government will make them in future as it has in the past. One of the tragedies of the strike is that it has, in the meantime, blocked further progress in this direction.