



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

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P K C Thomas Esq.,  
Republic of Ireland Department  
FCO

Your reference

Our reference

Date 8 April 1981

*Dear Peter,*

HUNGER STRIKE: LORD CARRINGTON'S MEETING WITH SECRETARY HAIG

Since Clive Abbott wrote to you on 27 March we have decided that it would be as well to include in the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's brief for his meeting next Friday with Secretary of State Haig a short piece on the hunger strike. Not only will Sands have been on hunger strike for 41 days on 10 April, but the meeting is to take place on the day following the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election. It seems highly probable therefore that the matter will be raised at some stage.

I attach a short line to take and an only slightly longer background note which we would be grateful if you could arrange to pass on to those responsible for putting together Lord Carrington's briefing material.

*Yours sincerely,*  
*Noel Cornick*  
NOEL CORNICK

cc Mr Bellish  
Mr Palmer  
Mr Jackson  
Mr Burton  
Mr Duggan  
Mr Mackay

13 APR 1981

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NORTHERN IRELAND: HUNGER STRIKE IN MAZE PRISONLine to take

We cannot accept that those who commit crimes for political motives should be treated differently from other convicted prisoners in Northern Ireland.

We will not negotiate on 'political status'.

The Northern Ireland prison regime is fair and equitable.

We are always prepared to discuss improvements in conditions on humanitarian grounds.

Background Note

Over 400 prisoners in Maze Prison and 29 in Armagh continue to protest in support of demands for 'political status'. Four prisoners in Maze are on hunger strike. One of them, Robert Sands, has refused food since 1 March (41 days on 10 April) and is a candidate in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election on 9 April. None of the hunger strikers is yet in a critical condition.

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Desks by 1750 hrs

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MUFAX ROOM  
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MR CORNICK - M

MUFAXED  
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HUNGER STRIKE: LORD CARRINGTON'S MEETING WITH SECRETARY OF STATE HAIG

You requested some background material on this subject for the Foreign Secretary's meeting with Secretary Haig.

"Northern Ireland Prisons Situation

1. Republican prisoners are continuing protest action in support of their claim for 'political status'. This would involve Government accepting that crimes committed for political motives should be treated differently from other crimes and permitting such prisoners to enjoy a more lenient prison regime than others. At present there are over 400 male protesters in the Maze Prison (now on a 'clean' protest) and 29 female prisoners in Armagh on a 'no-work' protest. In addition as part of this protest there are currently 4 male prisoners on hunger strike. The first, Robert Sands, started to refuse food on 1 March. He has now been joined by 3 other prisoners. The condition of none of the hunger strikers is yet giving cause for serious concern.
2. A recent development in the protest has been the candidature of the hunger striker Sands in the Westminster By-Election for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which will take place on 9 April. The election has ended up as a straight fight between Sands and an Official Unionist, Harry West. Sands supporters are claiming that a vote for him will strengthen his claim to political status and will force the Government to concede on this point, thus bringing the hunger strike to an end.

Line to take

3. The Government's position is that the present Northern Ireland Prison Regime is fair and equitable but that it is of course always prepared to consider improvements. However, it has remained adamant that it is not prepared to negotiate on the question of 'political status' for prisoners, whatever the form of protest action taken. The Government's position has the full support of Parliament and is in line with the European Commission on Human Rights' decision that prisoners are not entitled to special status. As far as the election is concerned

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the Government has not made any public comment pending the result. However, there is no reason to think that present policy on 'political status' will be changed even if Sands was to win."

*A. B. MacKay*

A B MacKAY  
PRB(1)

8 April 1981

cc Mr Belloch  
Mr Palmer  
Mr Jackson  
Mr Buxton - M

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