

E.R.

NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN LORD GOWRIE AND HUNGER STRIKERS' RELATIVES FROM DUNGIVEN HELD IN STORMONT CASTLE AT 1430 ON WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER 1981

Those present:

Lord Gowrie
A K Templeton

Mrs P McCloskey
Mrs B Lynch

Mrs McCloskey, accompanied by Mrs Lynch whose son Kevin had already died on hunger strike (Liam McCloskey was his 'replacement') arrived at 1430. The meeting lasted an hour and took place in a low key throughout. Although they were quite tearful at the start the meeting proceeded amicably despite the difficult and distressing circumstances.

2. Lord Gowrie welcomed Mrs McCloskey and Mrs Lynch expressing his sympathy for the heartbreaking predicament in which they found themselves. He pointed out that on his visit to the prison with the Secretary of State he had seen Liam who had been asleep at the time. It was tragic that young men, who had such opportunities before them firstly in prison and then on release in society, should lay down their lives with evident but wholly misguided sincerity. The Secretary of State and he intended to make what progress they could to promote development and reconciliation in Northern Ireland; however this process could not realistically begin under the duress of the hunger strike.

3. Mrs McCloskey also emphasised the importance of the hunger strike both in terms of the personal distress it caused her and the wider community disruption. On her last visit to Liam he had asked for the Minister to come and speak to him: he did not wish to die but could not go back and face his comrades unless he could get "something".

4. Lord Gowrie attempted gently but repeatedly to draw Mrs McCloskey on this subject - that is, what really constituted the demands of prisoners who were prepared to die to obtain them. At no stage did she do so but concentrated rather on going over the ground of Diplock courts, the blanket protest and the dirty protest with its supposed brutalities, excessive deprivation of facilities and privileges, and very poor food. She was not vehement in her expression of this, but

appeared to have accepted without question the propaganda version of events, presumably as related by her son. She also referred to a prison incident three years previously in which Liam had sustained minor injuries. (Considerable propaganda was made of the incident at the time; it was fully investigated and McCloskey's injuries were shown to have occurred as a result of his violent resistance to the search procedures then applied.

5. Only one of the five demands was in fact discussed to any degree. Mrs Lynch strongly believed that own clothing would have solved the problem "2 years ago" but that it was "very difficult" now. Both ladies attributed a great deal to the question of clothing, though Lord Gowrie pointed out that this did not appear to him an issue for which people would die. He emphasised that when Government did move then the bidding merely seemed to go up. Discussion then touched on the demand for political control of prisoners as epitomised in their insistence on negotiations via the OC. Both said they did not think they had any influence on him or the other 'OCs'. This was the reason they were appealing to the Minister.

6. This enabled Lord Gowrie to hope that the relatives should help in their way - and of necessity quite independent of government - to end the strike, and bring about the pre-conditions for a return to normality. The ending of the hunger strike was of great importance both in human terms and politically. For his part the Minister intended to maintain a close interest in the prisons and within reason was prepared to meet any conforming prisoner who wished to see him. In view, however, of the particular circumstances in this case he would be prepared to see Liam McCloskey once the latter had definitely abandoned his hunger strike and even though he remained a protester.

The Minister emphasised also that he would wish to clear any such meeting with the prison authorities but saw no likelihood of difficulty. Should Liam decide to come off he assured Mrs McCloskey that there was absolutely no question of government's crowing over a "victory"; she seemed reassured on this point.

7. Towards the end of the meeting Mrs McCloskey - quite unprompted - broached the subject of taking her son off the strike. In connection with Liam's ear complaint she confirmed that she had already told him she could not guarantee non-interference on her part, if he were in

E.R.

severe pain from it. Though she never actually said as much, she left little doubt that she would in fact intervene if and when her son became irrational or unconscious. One difficulty was, she observed, that one hunger striker (McIlwee) had died within an hour or so and without going through the coma phase. Lord Gowrie acknowledged her position as a mother and was at pains to emphasise that the decision was hers. Mrs McCloskey asked if any special consideration could be given to extra visits in view of Liam's condition and the fact that she had a large family all of whom wished to see him. She confirmed that the Department had already given her one special visit during the week. The Minister gave no commitment but indicated that he was sure she would continue to be sympathetically treated. He said he would look into this.

8. Both Mrs McCloskey and Mrs Lynch made play of the continued existence of special category - which they saw as "political status" - within the same prison area. This co-existence of "political status" and criminality for those who had committed the same offence, but at different times was inequitable and something which neither they nor the prisoners could understand. The Minister acknowledged the difficulty but stressed that there was no prospect of political status being granted. The abolition of special category was one part of the process to return to fully civilian conditions, inside the prisons as well as out. Mrs McCloskey in particular, however, could not accept that her son was a criminal - as having merited imprisonment, perhaps, but in the same league as an ordinary robber, no.

9. The meeting ended amicably with Mrs Lynch and Mrs McCloskey both thanking the Minister for seeing them. Mrs McCloskey handed Lord Gowrie a small volume of the late Mr Sands' works and a copy of the dossier prepared by the Dungiven Relatives Action Committee in 1979 following the alleged assault on her son. The Minister thanked her but gave no commitment on the dossier. (This document, mentioned above, is dated, belonging as it does to a much earlier phase of the propaganda campaign: it was presumably adduced as a means of substantiating Mrs McCloskey's thesis that the prisoners were victims of an unjust penal system).

PP *A K Templeton*
A K TEMPLETON (PRB(1))

24 September 1981

E.R.

SUMMARY

Although it was perhaps inevitable that little by way of positive developments could have been expected from such a meeting, the relatives were left in no doubt as to the Government's deep concern for their predicament. Equally, they were not given any false hopes that the five demands would be granted. No attempt was made to pressurise Mrs McCloskey - who was in any case not certain that she could save her son's life - but the Minister was at pains to point out that both Government and relatives could help in their necessarily separate ways. Mrs Lynch took very little part in the proceedings at all; she seemed totally absorbed and stunned by the personal consequences of her son's death and must have been embittered by it. Mrs McCloskey - for a relative action committee member - seemed very muddled as to what the protest and the strikes were truly about. She saw these as a response to the protest conditions rather than the broader issue of political status; her confusion had every appearance of being genuine but it is of course difficult to judge this or to what extent it is shared by other relatives. No undertakings were given beyond the Minister's commitment to see Liam McCloskey if and when he had ended his strike, and subject to consultations with prisons advisors.