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NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND SIR JAMES HENNESSEY IN STORMONT CASTLE ON 10 OCTOBER 1983

The Secretary of State and Mr Scott met Sir James Hennessey in Stormont Castle on 10 October to discuss progress with Sir James's inquiry into the escape from the Maze Prison. Sir James was accompanied by Mr Lakes and Mr Abbott. Mr Bourn, Mr Palmer, Mr Templeton and Mr Lyon were also present.

The Secretary of State said that he was grateful that Sir James had made available such a large number of staff from his inspectorate to undertake this inquiry, and for the urgency with which they were conducting it. Parliament would re-assemble on 24 October and he proposed to make a statement then. He did not wish to delay the inquiry's progress by asking them to make a formal interim report, but he would need to consider with Sir James what he might say to the House at that stage. In particular, he would want to reassure the House that action had been taken on any major inadequacies already identified. When Sir James came to consider his report, he would no doubt wish to take into account the political considerations which affected prison policy in Northern Ireland. NIO officials would be very ready to provide this. Sir James would also wish to take into account in drafting his report the Secretary of State's present inclination that it should be published in full, although account would need to be taken of security aspects.

Sir James Hennessey said that he was grateful for the ready co-operation he had received from the NIO, and the RUC and the Army. Prison officers had also been co-operative. The inquiry's programme of interviews were continuing. They had yet to see some key people. They had received twelve letters from prisoners in response to their request for information, and none yet from prison officers or from members of the public. They had not been contacted by any politicians except Mr Maginnis. They would take account of those questions from the Assembly Security Committee which fell within their terms of reference in preparing their report. It was too early to say what their report would find, but they had already identified two design faults at the Maze. The first was the vulnerability of the officer in the Control Room; and the second the lack of double gates for pedestrians at the main entrance. They might also make recommendations to

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improve the level of security, such as providing additional closed circuit television cover, but they had not yet uncovered any serious deficiencies in this area. They would also identify deficiencies in procedures and the performance of staff. It was already clear that there were serious deficiencies in the way in which some officers had performed their duties. They were also aware of the background of a member of staff. But they had no evidence at present of collusion. They had yet to decide whether to name those who had failed in their duties, although the recital of the facts would clearly identify some. They were aware of the political background and would wish to take it into account. They would welcome, therefore, briefing from NIO officials. Their present view was that no single policy decision following the hunger strikes had contributed to the escape, although taken together there may have been some effect cumulatively.

Sir James said that he had considered whether the inquiry should also deal with security in the Maze compound. They had interpreted their terms of reference, however, as applying to the Maze cellular, and extending to the compound only inasmuch as it shared a common security fence and what it could conceivably have been the source for the supply of arms. Otherwise, they would make clear in the report their view that the compound was in effect a separate prison and not, therefore, part of their inquiry. It was still too early to say when their final report would be ready, but they were aiming to have it completed by Christmas. It was unlikely to be significantly earlier than that. If they were to provide an interim report, the final report would be considerably delayed. Nor could they yet say much since their enquiries were continuing. In his statement to the House, he hoped the Secretary of State would be able to rest on the fact that he had received no recommendations from the inquiry and would not do so until their work was completed. He agreed that the report should be written with publication in mind. It might be possible to refer to sensitive matters in general terms, and to put the detail in an annex which was not published. But he would need to consider this further.

The Secretary of State noted that action was already being considered, and in some cases had been taken, to remedy the design deficiencies which Sir James had referred to and which the Prison authorities had already identified. He would need to provide some reassurance to the House about this, although he accepted it should not be presented as arising directly from Sir James's inquiry. The NIO should also

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consider whether these deficiencies were likely to compromise the security of the other prisons in Northern Ireland. He agreed that the inquiry's terms of reference did not extend to security in the Maze compound. He noted also that the inquiry would deal with action taken outside the prison only inasmuch as it may have affected the escape. The inquiry would not deal with the action subsequently taken to catch those who had escaped, or the subsequent treatment in prison custody of those who had been caught.

Concluding the discussion, the Secretary of State said that either he or officials would seek to discuss the text of his statement to the House with Sir James before 24 October. He would also look to have another meeting with Sir James before he reported. In the meantime, Mr Bourn and Mr Palmer were ready to brief the inquiry on the political background to the operation of the prison system in Northern Ireland.

W. C. C.

J. M. LYON
Private Secretary

11 October 1983

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PS/Mr Scott (B&L)-M
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Mr Bourn
Mr Palmer
Mr Buxton
Mr Merifield
Mr Angel -M
Mr Gilliland
Mr Norris -M
Mr Doyne-Ditmas
Mr Edis
Mr Reeve
Mr Boys Smith-M
Mr Wood-M
Mr Jackson
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