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*Loss of disadvice to be
possibilities (172) 29/5/81
cc Mr. [Signature]
Mr. Burke.*

27 May 1981

Dear Paddy,

You may wish to be aware that when I had lunch late last week with Dr Brian Mawhinney, the Conservative MP for Peterborough, he mentioned that he was concerned about the continuing adverse affects on politics of the hunger strike in Northern Ireland. At the time of the lunch the detailed results of the local government elections in Northern Ireland were not available.

Mawhinney emphasised that his concern was not widely shared within the Conservative party and said that most of the Conservative MPs shared the views of the Prime Minister. Mawhinney feels that it is essential that the hunger strike be ended. In his view it is not possible for the British Government at this stage to move on its own on any of the five demands. He thought it might be possible for the Government to move in conjunction with movement by the Government in Dublin or in response to recommendations of the European Commission for Human Rights. He is mulling over two possibilities.

1. It might be helpful if procedures in the Maze Prison could be changed by way of an agreement between the two Governments which would publicly state that they are seeking to bring prison practice and judicial regulations North and South of the border closer together. He thought that this would provide a mechanism by which the British Government could move on clothing and free association within the overall prison regulations in Northern Ireland and bring

conditions in Northern Ireland somewhat closer to the conditions which he believed were in practice in Portlaoise. In return he thought that the Government in the South could perhaps change the regulations with regard to bail and with regard to the admissibility of evidence in Court cases.

2. He wondered if a party other than the British Government or the Prisoners could approach the European Commission for Human Rights and ask them to make recommendations with regard to prison reform in Northern Ireland. He was thinking here that he himself might make the approach.

Mawhinney said that he will endeavour to discuss these two matters with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. If the latter sees any benefit in either of these approaches Mawhinney would then propose to raise them in public. He stressed that his interest was in creating a climate in which the British Government would find it possible to move on conditions in the Maze. Mawhinney is not convinced that such reforms would bring an end to the hunger strike but even if they did not do so they would, if offered, put the Provisional IRA on the defensive and not permit it to claim as heretofore that prisoners were dying on hunger strike because of British Government inflexibility on the five demands.

We have no evidence to show that such proposals would be well received by the British Government. It is of interest, however, that Mawhinney, who is a Protestant from Northern Ireland, is floating such ideas at the moment and the Department may wish to consider them, and in particular the first option mentioned, in case it should go further.

The Department will have seen references in the Press in which Michael Foot, the leader of the Labour Party, is quoted as having said that he will oppose any change in the regulations under which a person serving a prison sentence may put himself forward as a candidate in elections for the House of Commons. Mawhinney

said that notwithstanding this the Prime Minister remains determined to change the electoral law to prevent a prisoner going forward in an election in Northern Ireland. He confirmed that the Government is in no hurry to move an electoral writ for that constituency. They may not, however, be able to prevent the issue of the writ, which can be called for by any MP. In this connection it is significant that Dafydd Wigley, the Plaid Cymru MP for Caernarvon is reported as having said that if there is undue delay he will himself move the issue of the writ.

Mawhinney was very critical of John Hume and the SDLP for their failure to run an SDLP candidate in the election which Sands won. He said that Hume was not held in very high regard at Westminster at the moment and has lost a great deal of support in recent months. While the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election had much to do with this the real damage to the SDLP, in his view, was being done by Gerry Fitt. Since leaving the party Fitt consistently portrays the SDLP as a "green party in the pocket of the Taoiseach" which no longer has a serious interest in returning a devolved power-sharing administration to Northern Ireland.

Mawhinney also referred to the British media coverage of recent events in Northern Ireland. You will recall that the Prime Minister mentioned the subject also in her speech to the Conservative Women's Conference on 20 May. I have copied the full text of the speech to you but for ease of reference what she said is as follows:

"That is why (if the terrorist can gain some recognition for his cause) TV and Press have so great a responsibility. They must, of course, report the facts. Nothing would be more damaging than misinformation and lack of balance. Yet the line is hard to draw for terrorism needs publicity. Newspaper and television coverage can provoke the very reaction the terrorist seeks."

Mawhinney said that there was considerable dissatisfaction on the Tory backbenches about the British media coverage, particularly

about coverage on the BBC. They took the view that the hunger strike and the funerals received far too much coverage and that other deaths such as those of police and UDR men were not adequately covered. According to Mawhinney some of these backbenchers would like to have introduced some form of guideline which would in their view lead to more "balanced" reporting. Mawhinney himself does not share their views and feels that the media should be left to get on with its job. He does not think that Conservative dissatisfaction will lead to any legislative changes in relation to the media.

Yours sincerely

Dáithí

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