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H-Block Situation - Main Elements of Government
Activity.

On 30 June the Taoiseach at his first press conference after his election identified the H-Blocks prison protests as his political priority.

Wednesday 1 July, 1981

The Taoiseach and Tanaiste met the British Ambassador and urged that the Northern Ireland Office meet with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace and allow the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace to meet the prisoners as soon as possible. The Taoiseach cautioned against a policy of brinkmanship by the British given that as Joe McDonnell came nearer to death attitudes among the families and outside the prison generally would harden and a settlement become impossible. The Taoiseach pointed out that the prisoners themselves were urging the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace to continue its involvement despite contrary information or statements purporting to be made on their behalf.

Later that evening the Taoiseach spoke to the British Prime Minister by phone and repeated the substance of his representations to her Ambassador.

Monday 6 July, 1981

Throughout the preceding week the Government remained in almost continuous contact with members of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace who were endeavouring to reach a settlement to the hunger strike. At a meeting between the ICJP and Minister of State Alison the ICJP informed him that the hunger strikers considered the points set out in their statement to be the foundation of a solution of the hunger-strike provided that they received satisfactory clarification of detail and confirmation by an official of the NIO to them personally of the commitment of the British Government to act according to spirit and the letter of the statement.

The Secretary to the Government phoned the British Ambassador at the direction of the Taoiseach and requested that an official from the NIO convey directly to the prisoners what the terms of settlement were.

Wednesday 8 July, 1981

At 5.00 a.m. Joe McDonnell died. At 6.30 an NIO official went into the prison and the prison governor read a statement to the hunger strikers on what would happen when the protest ended. At 5.00 p.m. the ICJP issued a statement accusing the British Government of causing a break down of the Commission's initiative for ending the hunger strike by not sending an NIO official into the Maze as had been agreed (i.e. by mid-morning of 7 July 1981 at the latest.)

A statement issued by the Government in Dublin said that "the facts disclosed and the outline of an agreement given by the ICJP call for the most serious consideration by the British Government".

In a statement on the death of Joe McDonnell the Taoiseach said "I have repeatedly said that a solution can be reached through a flexibility of approach which need not sacrifice any principle. The onus of responsibility for showing this flexibility rests with both sides..... but the greater responsibility must, as always, rest on those with the greater power".

Friday 10 July, 1981

In a letter to the British Prime Minister the Taoiseach explained that "rising levels of sympathy for the prisoners" as a result of the hunger strike deaths were threatening the stability of the State. The Government he said were "persuaded" by the ICJP account of their meeting with Minister Alison and with the hunger strikers. To avoid "serious and progressive deterioration in bilateral relations" the Taoiseach urged the Prime Minister, "without anymore loss of time to accept the detailed description of a possible future prison regime set out by the ICJP on the basis of contacts with the NIO as the foundation of a solution of the crisis".

In a further initiative the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Affairs Designate met Sir Ian Gilmour and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in London. At the meeting the Minister for Foreign Affairs described the impact of the Maze crisis on public opinion in the Republic, questioned the British team on the handling of the ICJP initiative and urged them to renew contact with the ICJP.

Monday 13 July, 1981

Martin Hurson died at 4.30 a.m. The Taoiseach in a statement called on the British Government to respond to the arguments presented by the Irish Government in London on 10 July.

While attending an EEC Foreign Minister's meeting in Brussels the Minister Designate had discussions with the British Foreign Minister Lord Carrington. The Minister Designate urged the British Government to deal directly (not negotiate) with the prisoners and to involve the ICJP in their efforts to find a solution. A continuing role for the European Commission for Human Rights was also adverted to.

Tuesday 14 July 1981

In view of the unresponsive approach by the British authorities the Taoiseach wrote to President Reagan and asked him to use his "enormous influence with the British Prime Minister with a view to the implementation immediately of an already existing understanding mediated by the Commission for Justice and Peace....." In the letter the Taoiseach explained that the hunger strike crisis had increased support for terrorist organisations, was benefitting them and was threatening our security.

In response to a request from the Taoiseach and in view of reports that the British were delaying a response the Minister Designate phoned the British Lord Privy Seal Sir Ian Gilmour to urge a rapid British reply to the European Commission of Human Rights regarding the outstanding aspects of the McFeeley case about which the Commission had visited the Maze prison in April.

Wednesday 15 July 1981

Following the British announcement that they had accepted an offer from the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the prisoners and that a team would visit the prison forthwith the Taoiseach and the Minister Designate met with the British Ambassador. The Taoiseach expressed appreciation of the British Government's action and hoped that the prisoners would seek and receive clarification from the official who was going to visit the prison to announce the ICRC intervention. The Taoiseach also asked that the ICRC intervention should not cancel out the ECHR efforts.

The British Prime Minister in a reply to the Taoiseach's letter of 10 July 1981 "repudiated the charge of bad faith" in dealing with the ICJP. The Prime Minister claimed that the ICJP underestimated the constraints laid upon her Government by the need to retain proper control of the prison and over-estimated the possibility of persuading the hunger strikers to accept the compromise proposals. The Prime Minister explained that she was against direct negotiations with the prisoners because "that would confer upon them a status which they would value."

Thursday 16 July 1981

The Minister for Foreign Affairs Designate met the British Ambassador and emphasised the essence of the Government's position as being that

" the success of the present British initiative (the ICRC intervention) will depend on the extent to which the clarifications, offered by the official visiting the prison of the movement the British Government is prepared to make if the hunger strike ends would go to meet the position set out by the ICJP".

The Minister Designate expressed disappointment at the degree of clarification achieved the previous evening between the visiting Northern Ireland Office official and the prisoners.

Saturday 18 July, 1981

In a note to the British Government delivered by the Ambassador in London and concerning the prisoners demands for direct talks with the British Government, the Government urged the British Government to send a senior official into the prison to put forward a solution close to the position set out by the ICJP on 8 July 1981. The Government explained that there seemed hardly any difference of real significance between the ICJP position and the position of the British Government as explained to the Commission on 6 July.

Sunday 19 July, 1981

The British Government's reply to the previous days note verbale were handed to the Minister Designate by the British Ambassador. The British reply stated that "the latest statement from the protestors calls for negotiation. If the British authorities allowed negotiations now they would be faced with all manner of requests in future, with possible threats of further hunger strikes if negotiations are not granted. The British Government have made clear their readiness to clarify to the hunger strikers

the Government's position as set out in the statement of 8 July". The Minister Designate in the course of this meeting repeated the calls for a senior official from the NIO to visit the prison for the purpose of clarification and stressed this clarification should be positive and not merely a rereading of statements or answering of questions.

Monday 20 July 1981

Northern Ireland Office officials visited the Maze at 2.00 a.m. in order to clarify previous Government statements to the hunger strikers but when asked the protestors did not wish to take up the offer on the grounds that the IRA prisoner's leader McFarlane was not present. The British authorities refused to bring in McFarlane.

On the same day the Taoiseach responded to a request from the parents of Kieran Doherty that the Taoiseach and Tanaiste should visit their son. The Taoiseach said that such a visit would serve no useful purpose. A statement by the Taoiseach said that he greatly regretted that the British Government's offer of clarification the previous night was not accepted by the prisoners.

Friday 24 July 1981

Following reports received that McFarlane, 'leader' of the protesting prisoners, had offered to play a non-negotiating role in any proposed talks between the hunger strikers their families, priests and officials the Minister Designate met the British Ambassador. The Minister Designate during his meeting called on the British authorities to arrange a meeting including McFarlane and to make to it a new presentation of its position regarding prison conditions after the end of the hunger strike. It was again suggested that the presentation should approximate as closely as possible to the one worked out by the ICJP and Mr. Alison on 6 July.

Saturday 25 July, 1981

At a meeting between the Minister Designate and the British Ambassador the latter indicated that the alleged willingness of McFarlane to participate passively in a conference had not been confirmed and that no request for a conference had been received from the prisoners. The Ambassador explained that the British did not accord any status to McFarlane in practice or otherwise and that if the hunger-strikers really wished for clarification then the presence of McFarlane would be unnecessary. The Ambassador went on to say that there was a gap of substance between the British position and that of the ICJP and that the ICJP had all along under-estimated the constraints placed on the British authorities by their determination to retain control of the prisons and what went on there. The Minister Designate suggested that McFarlane be approached by someone to ascertain the accuracy of the views attributed to him. The Minister Designate recalled that on previous occasions McFarlane had been accepted as representing the prisoners and pointed out that the weakness of the hunger strikers precluded long discussions on their part even if only for purposes of clarification. The consequences of a continuance of the hunger strike as outlined to Mr. Atkins and Sir Ian Gilmour in London on 10 July were also referred to by the Minister Designate.

Monday 27 July, 1981

In a reply received from President Reagan the President stated that the recent deaths of Hurson and McDonnell were all the more tragic at a time when it appeared that a way might be found to resolve this issue. The President said that he hoped that the hunger strike could be brought to a peaceful conclusion with an end to the violence in Northern Ireland.

The Taoiseach and the Minister Designate met relatives of the hunger strikers and explained to them that contrary to some reports the previous week the Government was continuing without interruption its efforts to seek a solution to the problem. The Taoiseach confirmed that the Government would continue to take action along those lines most likely to contribute to settlement.

In a letter which the British Prime Minister sent to Irish-American politicians she referred to the reported statements by a spokesman for the Taoiseach that the British Government had met the Taoiseach's request that an official should speak to the hunger strikers and that he regretted that the hunger strikers had rejected the offer of clarification from the official.

Tuesday 28 July, 1981

In a meeting with the British Ambassador the Taoiseach requested clarification on the content of Mrs. Thatcher's letter and in a statement the Taoiseach said he was concerned that the letter from Mrs. Thatcher to the Irish-American politicians contained an inaccurate statement of the Taoiseach's position on the hunger strike. (In the meeting between the Minister Designate and the British Ambassador on 24 July the Minister Designate had specifically stated that reliance could be placed on that day's Irish newspapers reports of the Government's stance (and not on those earlier in the week)).

In a letter to the American politicians the Taoiseach pointed out that the Irish Government's efforts were continuing with great urgency and that the Government felt that the British Government could show itself more ready to respond to the proposals of the ICJP. The letter claimed that the British Government were aware through "repeated and continuous representations" that we are not satisfied that the approach to the prisoners of July 21 adequately met out earlier repeated requests for action." The letter expressed the hope that the British would make a new presentation of what was on offer to the hunger strikers.

Friday 31 July, 1981

Following a week in which a three man delegation from Provisional Sinn Fein and the IRSP had gone into Long Kesh on foot of a request by relatives and the reported determination by the prisoners to continue with their hunger strike, the Taoiseach issued a statement in which he described the hunger strike as the latest method chosen by the Provisional IRA to exploit the prison crisis. The statement expressed concern "at the effects of the hunger strike in this part of the country and at its potential effects on Anglo-Irish relations" and continued "I regret to say that it has been clear from the handling of the

problem by the British authorities that their assessment of the gravity of the situation created by the hunger strike had not corresponded with ours and that they had not recognised the well founded character of our concerns for the further consequences which would flow from its prolongation. The responsibility for failure does not lie only with hesitation or delay on the part of the British. On the contrary there is no doubt that intransigence was shown on the other side The prisoners represent themselves as belonging to a command structure. It is clear that those who are in charge of this structure can at any time end the crisis by ordering the hunger-strikers to end their protest. They have not done so". The statement concluded "disappointment at successive setbacks to our hopes will not deter the Government from continuing its efforts to help find a solution...."

The British Ambassador called on the Secretary Department of Foreign Affairs to give the British Government response to the Taoiseach's representations of 23 July about Prime Minister Thatcher's letter to American politicians.

Speaking on instructions the Ambassador said that Her Majesty's Government were concerned to hear that the Taoiseach regretted the reference to his views in the Prime Minister's message of 25 July to the Friends of Ireland. The Prime Minister he said was entirely unaware that she was in any way misrepresenting his views and would regret it if any difference between the two Governments should arise in consequence. Her Majesty's Government recognise he said that there are differences of appreciation between them and the Irish where the hunger strike is concerned but consider it important that our common opposition to terrorism should be recognised. They believe he said that trust, understanding and cooperation between the two Governments is vital if they were to beat the common enemy, the men of violence.

Saturday 1 August 1981

Kevin Lynch died at 1.00 a.m. after 71 days on hunger strike. The Taoiseach said he had learnt with deep regret of the death and expressed the hope that in the aftermath of this tragic development there would be a calm reaction to the news throughout Ireland which would allow efforts aimed at resolving the problem to proceed.

Sunday 2 August 1981

Kieran Doherty T.D. died at 7.16 p.m. on the 73rd day of his hunger strike. The Taoiseach in extending sympathy to the Doherty family condemned the murder of two RUC constables as a deplorable action. The Tanaiste said that the British Government had the major responsibility in finding a solution to the Maze hunger strike and that the latest death like the other deaths could have been avoided given flexibility on the part of the British Government and the PIRA leadership.

Wednesday 5 August 1981

The acting Minister for Foreign Affairs at a meeting with the British Charge d'Affaires reiterated the Governments position

and attitude on the H-Blocks issue and urged the British Government to implement the proposed reforms in the Maze Prison for conforming prisoners to demonstrate good faith and circumvent the problems of clarifications/negotiations.

Thursday 6 August, 1981

The Taoiseach had a further meeting with relatives of the hunger strikers at their request. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs explained why they could not take the action urged on them by the relatives. They pointed out that given the military discipline of the organisations to which the prisoners belong the hunger strike could be ended by orders given by these organisations to the members involved.

Friday 7 August, 1981

Following a meeting between the British Ambassador and the Minister for Foreign Affairs in which the former stated that the British Government was unwilling to make the changes in prison regime for conforming prisoners as requested the previous Wednesday, the Government in a statement said that it regretted that the British authorities did not find it possible to adopt a suggestion which seemed to be constructive and practicable and to involve no sacrifice of principle.

Saturday 8 August, 1981

Following the death of Thomas McElwee the Taoiseach expressed his sympathy with the McElwee family and also renewed his expression of sympathy for all the victims of Ireland and division in Northern Ireland.

Sunday 9 August, 1981

In an RTE radio interview the Tanaiste, Mr. O'Leary said that the British Government was intransigent and lacked the will to secure a settlement of the protest. He also said that the British Government was "uncaring and unresponsive to the representations of the Irish Government".

Tuesday 11 August, 1981

In a speech the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs called on the IRA to call off the campaign of violence.... "when that call is heeded at least it would become logical to invoke the diplomatic aid of the Government.... in pursuit of a compassionate end. But as long as it goes unheeded the attempted exploitation of the Governments legitimacy will remain just another hypocrisy."

Department of Foreign Affairs
August 1981

Annex: List of High Level Government contact with British Authorities on H-Blocks issue since 30 June