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MEETING ON PRISONS ISSUES, DUNDONALD HOUSE, STORMONT

3 MAY 1990

At the request of the Irish side, a meeting was held at Stormont with the Director of the Northern Ireland Prisons Service, Mr. John Steele, and his deputy, Mr. Chris McCabe, on 3 May 1990 in order to discuss a number of current prisons issues. The Irish side were represented by Mr. M. Collins and Mr. B. MacMahon of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Mr. P Collins and Mr. M. Gaffey, from the Secretariat. Mr. M. Dodds, of the British side of the Secretariat was also present. The following is a summary of the NIO's view of the current situation in the prisons in Northern Ireland.

CRUMLIN ROAD PRISON

Mr. Steele stated that the NIO were very concerned about the situation in Crumlin Road Prison but hoped that the current campaign for segregation by loyalist and republican prisoners would gradually run out of steam. He said that segregation would be firmly opposed by the authorities and stressed in particular the danger of attacks on prisoners by other prisoners in segregated conditions. (He cited the case of Lenny Murphy, the "Shankill Butcher", who murdered another loyalist prisoner, and got away with it, when loyalist and republican paramilitaries were segregated in Crumlin Road in the 1970s.) At present, loyalists and republicans are effectively segregated for 80% of the time in Crumlin Road because they choose to eat and exercise separately, a situation which, Mr. Steele admitted, suits the prison authorities. The NIO take the view that the current campaign is not the result of the presence on remand in the prison of a number of senior men on both sides (UDA leaders arrested as a result of the Stevens Inquiry, Danny Morrison of Sinn Fein and a number of senior IRA suspects from Co. Tyrone), but is being directed by the IRA in order to exercise control over younger prisoners and stop "waverers" from opting for Maghaberry instead of the Maze, where prisoners are segregated. According to this view, the campaign suits the loyalist paramilitaries who want segregation for similar reasons and have

reacted in "a less subtle fashion" than the IRA with a campaign of intimidation of prison officers and their families. (In recent days, following the issuing of a threat by the UFF, the homes of a number of prison officers, in generally Protestant areas, have been petrol bombed). He said that the new prisoner assessment unit in Crumlin Road was working well and that a significant number of newly-convicted prisoners were now serving their sentences in Magilligan and Maghaberry instead of the Maze, where they would have to submit to the paramilitary command structure. As a result, and because of recent releases, the segregated population at the Maze is now down to 400 prisoners, with large numbers of these adjusting their behaviour as their release dates come within sight. Crumlin Road, which houses remand prisoners, is therefore the only really worrying prison for the authorities at present.

On the situation in Crumlin Road, Mr. Steele said that the aim of the paramilitaries was to have 'A' Wing designated for republican prisoners and 'C' Wing for loyalists. He stressed, however, that the NIO regard the prison as "very controlled" and believed that, although the republican prisoners have recently caused serious damage to the dining room, procedures are such that there is no way they could ever take control of any section of the prison. Indeed, since the Strangeways riot, extra restrictions have been introduced and religious services are now held on the Wings and not in the chapel. When asked about allegations of petty harrasment of prisoners, he stuck to the view that these referred to the controlled regime at the prison. He said the Prison Service was "perfectly satisfied" that there was now no threatening of prisoners or actual violence by prison officers, who, apart from their professionalism, were, he stated, very aware of the calibre of the prisoners under their control and the threat that they could pose to prison officers and their families outside. Mr. McCabe stated that following the last major escape attempt from Crumlin Road, in October 1989, three prison officers were charged with

attacking prisoners and insisted that this had only been possible because of the willingness of other members of the prison staff to make statements implicating them. He said that the three involved were not normally in contact with prisoners and had only been in the prison, as "trades officers", to fill in holes in the yard which had been dug during the search following the escape attempt.

THE MAZE AND MAGHABERRY

Mr. Steele stated that the long-term aim of the Prison Service was to fill the new prison at Maghaberry and to reduce the numbers at the Maze as far as possible. He spoke at length and enthusiastically of the atmosphere and conditions at Maghaberry, contrasting them with the difficulties at the Maze. (He admitted that most prisoners at the Maze who were prepared to break their links with the paramilitaries and move to the integrated conditions at Maghaberry have now done so and that although facilities were being further developed at the new prison, it was unlikely that any further large numbers would opt to move there from the Maze).

He said that the Maze was steadily "shrinking" and two blocks had now been closed down. The IRA were, however, continuing to press their three demands, for which they had attempted to launch a major campaign in the summer of 1988. The Prison Service view of the situation on each was:

(a) Abolition of top risk / category A / "red book status: there are only nine such prisoners left and some changes in the regime may be possible, if there are no disturbances at the prison. The matter has been discussed with the prisoners on a regular basis.

(b) Inter-wing association: the possibility of some movement is "under active discussion" in the NIO. Mr. Steele stated, for

our information, that the Governor of the Maze is anxious to do something on the issue and that a debate is underway, involving Ministers.

(c) Abolition of lunchtime and afternoon lock-ups: The NIO are determined not to give in on a demand which, they feel, would give the paramilitaries more control over prisoners.

SPECIAL CATEGORY PRISONERS

The Special Category population at the Maze is now down to 33: 7 republicans and 26 loyalists. If the current pattern of expected release dates is maintained it is expected that the vast majority of these will be released within a couple of years. (Mr. Steele stated, confidentially, that he thought it possible that, within eighteen months, all but two of the special category prisoners, both republicans, would have had their reviews and been given release dates). Two wings of the prison, with 50 cells, remain designated to the special category prisoners.

PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES FOR PRISONERS

Mr. Steele expressed satisfaction with the operation of the new psychiatric unit at Maghaberry. The unit has a capacity of 25 and currently houses 17 prisoners; it is the policy of the Prison Service not to detain prisoners in the unit for longer than 2-3 months. He mentioned a number of specific cases which have been raised by the Irish side in recent years, noting that he had met Thomas McGrath recently, that he appeared to be "doing quite well" and that he has enrolled in a vocational training course in joinery. He said that Aidan Mills was currently in the psychiatric unit and, although he clearly still had problems, seemed to be coping quite well. He will shortly qualify for the pre-release home leave scheme, but it has not yet been decided whether his condition will allow him to join it.

On the general question of Pre-Release Programmes, he said that the scheme was working very well but that the NIO were very prepared to call back prisoners on home leave, or those released on licence, if there was even a suspicion of their becoming involved again with paramilitaries. He noted that, to date, released life sentence prisoners have not become involved again because of family pressures and because the paramilitary organisations do not want them.

IRISH LANGUAGE IN PRISONS

Mr. McCabe stated that the Prison Service had no problems in encouraging interest in the Irish language, in terms of providing courses and reading material for prisoners; in addition, ways were being examined to enable a change in the rules on the wearing of the Fainne, by instituting a system allowing the wearing of emblems signifying educational achievement. He said that they could see no way of providing pitches suitable for the playing of Gaelic games in prison and, on the issue of communications to prisoners in Irish, stated that the problem was that the Service did not have the resources to censor such communications where necessary.

In response to questions from the Irish side on complaints that prisoners have not been permitted to use the Irish form of their names, Mr. Steele stated that the only issue involved was the name on a prisoners warrant, i.e., the name he/she was convicted under. He stated that any prisoner who declares his name in the Irish form in court will be treated on that basis in prison, but the prison authorities will not agree to use any form of personal name while a sentence is being served other than that declared at the starting point of a prisoner's trial.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Irish side briefed the British side on the operation of the new Sentence Review Group.

M. Gaffey
3 May 1990