

E. R.

IN CONFIDENCE

cc Mr Hannigan  
Mr Wyatt  
Mr Gilliland  
Miss McGlashan  
Mr Jackson

Mr Jackson

I agree that it would be better  
if Mr Alison could meet them

MR GLE

SDLP AND THE H BLOCKS : CASE FILE 29/11/4

Mr Jackson has asked for comments on the proposed reply to the letter of 27 November 1979 from Michael Canavan, SDLP Spokesman for Law and Order on the H Blocks, in which he urged the Secretary of State to make humanitarian concessions on the prisoners' conditions. Mr Jackson is proposing to put forward a full reply for Mr Alison's signature setting out Government policy in sympathetic terms.

2. Although I have no major objections to the letter (except on the answer on the issue of the prisoners' isolation), I firmly believe that a letter is not the best way to respond to this SDLP approach and recommend that we should offer a meeting with Mr Alison to the SDLP.

3. An exchange of correspondence, in my view, is unlikely to persuade the SDLP of the real problems being faced in the Maze and is probably likely to do harm, particularly given the character of Michael Canavan. The SDLP have always pursued a delicate but deliberate line on the Special Category Protest. They have set their face consistently against concessions on the issue of status and indeed have rejected the Peace People's idea of Emergency Status; but they have urged the Government to make gradual improvements to the conditions faced by the prisoners as a way of reducing the effectiveness of the protest - this is very much in line with the opinions of Cardinal O Fiaich and Bishop Edward Daly.

4. The SDLP are to a certain extent under pressure from their own supporters. Whilst they can rightly say that the protest receives little support from the outside community, - and I think that we must give the SDLP credit for saying this - we also have to realise that in the small tightly-knit communities of Londonderry and certain areas of West Belfast, the H Blocks campaign is still a major PIRA propaganda point and involves many people, through family ties, who would otherwise take an anti-PIRA line. The SDLP are very conscious of this and are seeking ways of drawing this sort of support away from PIRA (who are their bitterest enemy).

5. For example, Dr Alastair McDonnell, who has recently been appointed leader of the SDLP group in the Belfast City Council, rang me today on a personal basis to say that he was personally very concerned about the H Blocks problem. He had recently been speaking to various relatives of prisoners, who are his patients, and believes that the Government could make much progress in West Belfast in weaning people away from the PIRA if concessions could be made on prisoners' conditions. He was also making the point that the undermining of the PIRA campaign, both in NI and abroad would

IN CONFIDENCE



give greater stimulus to the political discussions and to the forthcoming Conference.

6. I very firmly agree with Mr Jackson that the SDLP do not realise the nature of the protest campaign - namely that the protest is not about conditions but about whether there is a war or not. But this is a difficult point to put across in a letter to people in the SDLP who have to face up to prisoners' relatives on the ground and have to try to persuade them of the rightness of SDLP policy, to persuade them away from supporting PIRA. In my view, therefore, it is far better for a sympathetic Minister to speak directly to an SDLP delegation.

7. I have two particular comments on the submission put up by Mr Jackson:

- i. Paragraph 3 of Submission: I disagree, with respect, with Mr Jackson's views of the SDLP's political position on the protest campaign. The SDLP's line has always been consistent and I think it unlikely that the SDLP will be pressed to adopt a progressively more hostile attitude to the Government's stand on special category status. John Hume and Michael Canavan have always rigidly held to the principle that there can be no concession on status.
- ii. Paragraph c (page 2) of draft letter: Again, with respect, I dislike the proposed answer to the allegation that the prisoners suffer from isolation because of the deprivation of their privilege of free association. Taken out of context, this paragraph would surely offend liberal opinion - the idea that contact with prison warders and solicitors reduces the sense of isolation felt by prisoners is a little difficult, in my opinion, to justify publicly.

8. Much, of course, depends on Mr Alison's willingness to speak with the SDLP on this issue, but, even if he prefers to issue the letter, I would suggest that he nevertheless offer the SDLP the opportunity of a meeting with him in the light of his reply to their representations.



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DIVISION 3(B)

19 December 1979