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NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL REVIEW: 17-30 AUGUST 1981

A: INTRODUCTION

1. The main focus of attention during this holiday period continued to be the hunger strike, highlighted on 20 August when the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election was won by Owen Carron on an Anti-H-Block ticket. On the morning of polling day a 10th hunger striker died while the relatives of a second authorised medical intervention when his condition suddenly deteriorated. Two more Republican prisoners joined the fast.

B: NORTHERN IRELAND

2. At the end of the period a total of six Republican prisoners in the Maze prison were on hunger strike. Michael Devine died at 7.50 am on 20 August on the 60th day of his strike, and the same day the relatives of Patrick McGeown authorised medical intervention when his condition deteriorated suddenly after only 42 days on strike. John McMullan and Bernard Fox joined the fast on the 17 and 24 August respectively.

3. The Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election on 20 August was won by Owen Carron (Anti-H-Block) with a majority of 2,230 over Ken Maginnis (UUP). On a high poll (88.6%) Carron slightly improved the majority achieved by Sands last April. The full result was:

Owen Carron (Anti-H-Block Proxy Political Prisoner)	31,278
Ken Maginnis (UUP)	29,048
Seamus Close (Alliance)	1,930
Thomas Moore (WPRC)	1,132
Martin Patrick Green (Peace Lover)	249
Simon Hall-Raleigh (General Amnesty)	90

4. Once it became clear that the SDLP did not intend to contest the by-election, Carron's success - as the only specifically nationalist/republican candidate in a deeply polarized constituency with a natural nationalist majority - became predictable. Because of the deep sectarian division within the constituency the result should not necessarily be interpreted as a barometer of support for the prisoners, although it clearly gave a considerable boost to the H-Block campaign.

5. Amid vociferous UUP claims that Carron's success was due to intimidation and personation, Maginnis threatened legal action to contest the result. Harold McCusker MP (UUP), who acted as personation agent for Maginnis in the Coalisland area, claimed that "anything between 5 - 10,000 illegal votes" could have been cast in the by-election. However, in his acceptance address Carron

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admitted that his supporters had been subject to "mass intimidation and harassment by the RUC and the UDR and from the undemocratic bully-boys of loyalists". He concluded: "We will ensure that a settlement to the H-Block crisis is inevitable and Maggie Thatcher's unjust and brutal policy on the H-Blocks will be brought to an end".

6. Carron's victory was widely deplored. The DUP said that "Unionists of Northern Ireland as a whole can only view with alarm and disgust the fact that over 31,000 people came out to vote for Owen Carron who has consistently supported the actions of the convicted terrorists in the H-Blocks", while the moderate Alliance Party commented "those who voted for him carry a share of the responsibility for continued violence and death". Mr Maginnis called Carron's supporters "fellow travellers of the IRA murderers who have gunned down innocent people in this constituency and who murdered our helpers after the last election".

7. Tom Moore (the WPRC candidate) challenged Carron to call an end to the hunger strike to save lives and, more importantly, call off the campaign of violence being waged against the people of Northern Ireland". Gerry Fitt MP (Independent Socialist) also advised Carron to use all the influence he had in the interests of the Ulster people to bring the hunger strike to an end, and added "He is the representative of PSF and has influence".

8. On 24 August Carron sent a telegram to the Prime Minister asking for a meeting "regarding the critical situation in the H-Blocks"; and on the same day publicly supported a statement by Gerry Adams (PSF Vice-President) that "legitimate armed action against the British forces" was a necessary ingredient of the nationalist struggle.

9. Mrs Thatcher replied on 26 August that she was unable to meet the new MP, but referred him instead to the Departmental Minister concerned: "The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr Humphrey Atkins, is away on holiday, but his deputy, Mr Michael Alison, is ready to make an appointment to see you". Mrs Thatcher added that the inclusion of Danny Morrison as the MP's Press Secretary at such a meeting (as Carron had requested) "would not be appropriate". Mrs Thatcher's refusal followed the Taoiseach's decision the day before not to meet Carron and a group of relatives of the hunger strikers. The request was turned down without any explanation.

10. Carron's reaction was angry: "Mrs Thatcher's refusal to meet me demonstrates the scurrilous contempt she has for me as an elected MP and, in particular, it is an insult to the people of Fermanagh-South Tyrone who, for a second time through the democratic process have stood by the prisoners and endorsed their five just and reasonable demands. My election has again brought the prison crisis to the forefront and Mrs Thatcher's refusal, coupled with that of Garret FitzGerald yesterday, proves there is a conspiracy between London and Dublin to relegate the impact of the election in Fermanagh-South Tyrone and to try to down grade my influence on the hunger strike campaign. I have been elected to explore every avenue to have the hunger strike resolved on a permanent basis and I am prepared to meet anybody and everybody. To this purpose a meeting will be arranged with Mr Atkins or Mr Alison as soon as they make themselves available and I will bring my advisors".

In the event Mr Alison met Carron on his own on 28 August. In a statement afterwards Mr Alison reiterated that there would be no negotiation on the prisoners demands and insisted that the authorities would retain control of the prison. Carron described the meeting as "quite amicable" but accused the Government of "trying to make excuses about the control of the prison, which I said was not an issue, since the prisoners were not trying to take control".

12. The prisoners released a statement over the weekend 29/30 August claiming that the Government was only interested in total surrender, and the rumoured changes in the prison regime for conforming prisoners would be "merely a tactical manoeuvre to undermine the support of the hunger strikers by attempting to fool genuinely concerned people".

13. Seamus Mallon (SDLP deputy leader) commented on 22 August that "the message of the last few months in Fermanagh-South Tyrone is that the SDLP and the Irish Government must very obviously lead towards Irish Unity or the paramilitaries will lead". Gerry Adams (vice-president PSF) meanwhile said that in future PSF candidates would contest elections "in order to defeat the SDLP and emerge as the undisputed leaders of the Nationalist community".

14. James Molyneaux MP (UUP leader) accused the Catholic hierarchy on 29 August of becoming "increasingly identified with the Republican cause to the point where it is in danger of becoming inseparable in the minds even of English Roman Catholics from those Republicans who are prepared to murder to give effect to their aspirations". He continued: "the Catholic hierarchy is rapidly approaching a cliff-edge beyond which lies a dark age for Ireland and the Christian faith".

C: REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

15. Following what was described as a 2-day review of Anglo/Irish policy on 24/25 August by the Irish Cabinet, it was reported that the Taoiseach had suggested closer communication between Dublin and the Unionist population in Northern Ireland. The two main Unionist parties, however, were not in favour. On 25 August Jim Allister (DUP) commented "We understand perfectly well two fundamental facts. Firstly, that the murderers of hundreds of our people have a safe haven in Dr FitzGerald's country, and secondly, Dr FitzGerald's Constitution denies us even the right to exist". Jim Molyneaux (UUP leader) indicated that he "certainly would not want to speak with a Government which had a constitutional claim to Northern Ireland". However, Dr FitzGerald agreed at a meeting of members of "Socialists Against Nationalism" on 19 August to examine "in a sympathetic way" Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution which claim jurisdiction over Northern Ireland. He noted that he himself when in opposition had urged the then Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, "to get rid of the obstacle to improved North/South relations posed by Articles 2 and 3 (of the Constitution) in their present formulation".

E.R.

I MISCELLANEOUS

(a) Independence

16. Seamus Mallon (SDLP deputy leader) on 30 August strongly denied a report that his party was to meet the Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party (the new political wing of the UDA) to discuss the idea of Ulster independence: "This is a matter we have examined very closely and found it to be unviable both politically, economically, and in any practical facet of day-to-day government".

(b) Belfast City Council

17. The UUP unsurprisingly won a City Council by-election on 27 August (held to fill a vacancy caused by the death of a DUP councillor shortly after the May elections). The ULDP (see above) made their electoral debut in this election, polling a respectable 8% of 1st preference votes.

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