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10 DOWNING STREET

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From the Private Secretary

23 June 1981

Dear Noel,

Message from Mr. Haughey

As you know, the Irish Ambassador called on the Prime Minister this evening to deliver a message, of which I enclose a copy, from the Taoiseach to the Prime Minister about the hunger strike.

For the most part, Mr. Kennedy confined himself to repeating the contents of the Taoiseach's message. I do not, therefore, propose to record his remarks in detail. However, one or two points may be worth noting:

- (a) Mr. Kennedy said that if it were possible for HMG to look again at the regime in the Maze Prison, and the other prisons, now was the time to do so. There was a slight lull. Once the next hunger striker died, the situation would deteriorate again;
- (b) The Irish Government sensed from their contacts in the North that there was at present a sense of bewilderment and puzzlement among the relatives of the hunger strikers about what exactly the future held. This was also shared by some of the prisoners. This was something which could, perhaps, be exploited;
- (c) The continuation of the present stalemate would ensure a continuous increase in the propaganda support for the IRA. They might fail to win political status but they would win the propaganda victory. They had already gained a great deal since last October;

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/ (d)

- (d) The Taoiseach believed that it would be possible, e.g. through the approach advocated by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, to "eliminate" some of the points being made by the IRA. Even if this failed to end the hunger strike, it would help in the propaganda war. The Taoiseach, who was very anxious to help, stood ready to discuss the situation with the Prime Minister on the telephone.

The Prime Minister said that the failure of the hunger strikers to complain to the European Commission on Human Rights made it clear that they in fact had no genuine complaints about the prison regime. Their objective was quite different. They would not be diverted by concessions. The difficulty with the approach advocated by the Taoiseach was that it went along with the salami tactics of the IRA leadership.

The problem in Northern Ireland had not been created by HMG. But there was a general expectation that HMG should solve it. It was not clear how, and in any case if HMG did succeed in solving the immediate problem, they would simply be presented with another problem to solve which further concessions would be sought. The recent statement by the Irish Bishops had been excellent but it seemed to have had little effect. The IRA was in the hands of left-wing extremists who were not greatly interested in the views of the Church.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister said that she would of course consider the Taoiseach's letter but it was not easy to see what HMG could do. It was for others to move.

You should be aware that the Prime Minister mentioned, in passing, the complaint which one of the hunger strikers had apparently intended to address to the European Commission on Human Rights but which, as you know, seems never to have been dispatched. On the way out, I tried to indicate to Mr. Kennedy the sensitivity of this piece of information. However, he seemed not to have realised the significance of what the Prime Minister had said, and I judged it better not to pursue the matter.

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/ The Prime

The Prime Minister also informed Mr. Kennedy, very briefly, of the Government's intention to amend the Representation of the People Bill so as to extend disqualification to prisoners serving a sentence of more than 12 months in the Republic of Ireland. Mr. Kennedy welcomed this news. He thought the amendment would remove a potentially serious source of embarrassment to the Government in Dublin.

I am sending copies of this letter and enclosure to Roderic Lyne (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely

Nihal Alexander

Noel Cornick, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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23rd June 1981

I have been asked by the Taoiseach to convey the following message:

Dear Prime Minister

I should like to refer again to the situation in the Maze Prison. The hunger strikes there are a continuing source of tension, difficulty and danger. The situation is a cause of deep and serious concern for the Irish Government.

The hunger strikes and the deaths are having, inter alia, the following results:-

1. They have generated an entirely new level of support for the IRA among the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. They have widened and deepened the polarisation between the communities there.
2. They have already had a substantial impact on political life here, as the election of two prisoners and the relatively large vote for other hunger strike candidates in the recent general election indicates. Future developments in this area are at present impossible to predict but even at present, from the point of view of security, the situation is a cause of grave anxiety.
3. While it is not ultimately for us to judge the situation it would seem that Great Britain is incurring some measure of damage to her standing on the international scene. There is clearly a widespread upsurge of support for the IRA around the world and particularly in the United States. The implications of this for the flow of material support for violence and also for security measures, North and South, are very serious.

4. The prospect of pursuing increasingly fruitful Anglo-Irish relations is certainly not enhanced.

From our point of view, we must emphasise that the finding of a solution to the situation is of fundamental and far-reaching importance.

While it is impossible to judge with certainty, there are some indications that the present may offer some hope that a way forward can be found. There are circumstances which are unlikely to recur. It seems improbable that any similar respite will offer if the deaths begin again.

Your Government has expressed readiness to keep all aspects of prison conditions under review, in the context of your commitment to a humanitarian regime. I know and appreciate your readiness to consider any further suggestions by the European Commission of Human Rights. Unfortunately, my understanding is that the pace at which that Body's work is proceeding means that it is unlikely to be of any assistance during the present respite.

An approach on the lines we worked out in Dublin before Christmas might suit, that is, a straightforward and clear exposition of what is on offer. The substance might relate to further adjustments that might be made throughout the Northern Ireland prison system which would not constitute the grant of political status, or impair the authorities' control of the prisons. The recent suggestions by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace may provide a basis for progress.

I appreciate that you may be concerned that a fresh initiative will not end the hunger strike and that those involved will simply exploit the situation to further their campaign. There can, of course, be no certainty about the response. Our assessment is that nevertheless, the balance of advantage is strongly in favour of another initiative. If the attempt is not made, further deaths of hunger strikers will be exploited in IRA propaganda. The resultant accession of support is likely far to exceed what would flow to them if changes were made in the prison rules. Even if the attempt were unsuccessful, it could moderate the flow of support and would also have favourable effects on opinion in the Republic and throughout the world. It would also be

of benefit for the fruitful development of relationships within these islands which I continue to hope can flow from the outcome of our meeting last December.

It goes without saying, of course, that we are ready to help in every way possible, in finding an acceptable solution.

Yours sincerely

CHARLES HAUGHEY