

CONFIDENTIAL

Miss Pugh
Mr. Dabell
ANT
11/10/81
2 Mr. Topham
Mr. Kay

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

On the afternoon of Monday 28 September, Lord Gowrie had a meeting in Stormont Castle, at their request, with relatives of five of the remaining six hunger strikers. The request for the meeting had been received the night before via Cllr Jim Canning (Ind) acting on behalf of Father Faul, who had convened a meeting of relatives of the same families on Sunday 27 September. It had not proved possible to contact the Devine family so they were not represented at the meeting.

2. The following were present:-

Lord Gowrie	Mr Eddie Carville	- Brother and sister of
Mr Blelloch	Mrs McElroy	Carville
Mr Brooker	Mrs Pickering	- Mother of Pickering
	Mrs Hodgins	- Mother and sister
	Mrs Quinn	of Hodgins
	Mr McMullen	- Father of McMullen
	Louise and Anne Sheehan	- Sisters of Sheehan
	Mr and Mrs McWilliams	- Hodgins' uncle and aunt.

3. Lord Gowrie opened by saying that he was pleased to have this opportunity of meeting the relatives, although of course the meeting had been called at their request. He appreciated the difficulties which confronted them as the families of the hunger strikers and said that he was disposed to be helpful to them. He stressed that it was to be a private meeting.
4. Mr McWilliams opened for the relatives by saying that judging from what had taken place at the meeting the day before, there did not seem to be much hope of solving the problem. Relatives had put their heads on the block by coming to see the Minister and they wished to know whether or not he had the authority to bring the problem to an end.
5. In reply, the Minister said that the Government had been meticulous in trying to preserve the position of the families. It had not in any way sought to bring pressure to bear on them nor would it do so in future. He urged the families to bring their views out into the open so that they could be discussed; he would see how things developed thereafter.
6. Mr McWilliams said that the families did not have power over the hunger-strikers and were critical of what they considered to be HMG's intransigence. They (the families) were unclear about HMG's response to the five demands and thought that the conflict had developed into a battle of wits as to who could endure the longer.

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At Sunday's meeting it had been suggested that they ought to seek a meeting with someone in the NIO, perhaps the Secretary of State, but they had been surprised at the speed with which today's meeting had been arranged. He asked what the Government's position was on the five demands and complained that none of the relatives had been told directly by the NIO or by Ministers what the details were.

7. In reply, Lord Gowrie said that his position was as follows. The Government would not negotiate over the five demands, either through intermediaries or directly with the hunger-strikers, nor would it be forced to act under duress. It had been the view of successive Governments that more would be lost by doing so than would be gained. Whilst he recognised the courage and conviction of these young men, nonetheless he considered them to be misguided. However, if the hunger strike did come to an end, the Minister promised that the following things would happen. First, the Government would not claim a large public victory and crow about success, (this was not of course to deny the press the freedom to express a resolution of the problem in such terms). Second, as Minister responsible for prisons he had absolute authority to build on and make further improvements to the prison regime for all prisoners. Although he believed improvements had already been offered, prison life was not a static existence, ideas moved on and the chance of further improvements could be examined in relation to work, association, remission and clothing. As a realist he knew that if the men finished their fast they would be looking for something to save their face, but what he as the Minister could not say was "You come off and we will offer you X, Y and Z". The decision to come off the hunger-strike had to be taken by the strikers themselves, but thereafter Ministers would try to be helpful.
8. There then followed a general discussion about the nature of the various protests. The relatives seemed unable to agree about the reasons behind them. Mrs Hodgins said that they had nothing to do with prison conditions because the prison was a modern one. Mrs Pickering seemed to attribute them to the way that prisoners were ill-treated by prison officers, whereas the Sheehan sisters were of the firm view that it was the prisoners' status as political prisoners that was at stake; they wanted to be treated differently.
9. Mr McWilliams said that it all went back to the political problem of Irish versus English. He maintained in effect that sentencing policy in the courts varied depending on an individual's political point of view. He compared his nephew's sentence of 14 years with that of a Loyalist who had been given 3 years. His relative (Hodgins) had not been found in possession of anything; the Loyalist had been found in possession of 1600 rounds of ammunition and six rifles. Thus he saw his community as cornered, cornered by the political situation, Diplock Courts, etc. Mr Whitelaw had given political status, then it had been retracted. In such a situation it was inevitable that the prisoners would see themselves as political prisoners and they saw no alternative to a hunger-strike.

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10. In reply, the Minister said that he did not dismiss the hunger-strikers out of hand. He acknowledged their courage but could not accept their motives. Nor could he negotiate with them without calling into question the credibility of the whole of our civil system. He rejected any suggestion that the judiciary sentenced differently along sectarian lines and pointed out that the Diplock Courts only existed as a response to the problem of intimidation of jurors. The same problem existed in the Irish Republic. The Minister reiterated that the decision to end the hunger-strike lay in the hands of the strikers themselves, that the Government would try to be helpful once the strike had ended, but that it would not contemplate changes under duress. As a Minister he had to tread carefully, not least because the problem not only encompassed the prisoners themselves, but organisations behind the prisoners.
11. After the Minister had reiterated his offer of his help and the terms under which he would be prepared to offer it, Mrs Hodgins urged him to put his commitment in writing. She thought that if the Minister did this, the strike could be ended in a matter of days.
12. In reply to this request, Lord Gowrie said that he would try to think if there was anything he could say and anyway that he could say it, that would be seen as an earnest of his good faith. He believed that a good deal of work had been done on the areas of work, association, remission and clothing, and that there was scope for still further change, but not under pressure of a violent protest since violence was violence even if self-directed.
13. Mrs Hodgins believed that if the hunger-strikers were given their own clothes plus free association within each block, they would bring all forms of protest to an end. Mr McWilliams maintained that prisoners were already segregated on sectarian lines in the prisons. Mr Blelloch assured him that they were not; other than in the protesting blocks, prisoners are mixed within the wings and in some cases within individual cells.
14. Mr McWilliams said that if the Minister were to make a statement or put something in writing to the effect that improvements would be made, the hunger-strike would end. Lord Gowrie asked how it would be if he gave an undertaking to see the hunger-strikers, to hear what they had to say and explain to them what improvements would be made, after they had properly come off the hunger-strike. The Sheehan sisters urged the Minister to go and see them now, which he said he would not do because both parties would be acting under duress. The Sheehan sisters said that the hunger-strikers had come to the point where they needed to negotiate; there was no possibility of them ending their fast of their own accord. They thought that the gesture of the Minister meeting the strikers and listening to them might help. The Minister reiterated that he could not act under duress, not least because in a "life and death" atmosphere, anything said was liable to be misunderstood or distorted in a way that could lead to further unnecessary deaths.
15. It was suggested that the Minister might instead go in to meet McFarlane. He dismissed this on the grounds that whilst he might be able to do something to help the hunger-strikers individually, the organisations behind them were a different matter. Mr McWilliams accepted this point entirely; the Minister could not negotiate with the PIRA.

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16. One of the Sheehan sisters said that she now realised that the Minister was never going to negotiate with the prisoners whilst they were still fasting. Lord Gowrie said that this was so but reminded the meeting that he was willing to re-examine clothing and matters pertaining to work and remission once they had finally come off. He would also be prepared to meet them then. He asked the relatives to recognise the serious political ramifications for him of the latter undertaking.
17. As the meeting drew to a close, Mr McWilliams urged the Minister to give them some form of statement, as Mrs Hodgins had suggested. The Sheehan sisters did not think that what was on offer would make any difference but urged the Minister to make a statement anyway as there was nothing to lose. Mr McWilliams took a more optimistic view. He had not come to the meeting with any hopes at all, but had found a small amount of reassurance in what the Minister had said. He too would welcome a statement.
18. Lord Gowrie foresaw the difficulty from his point of view of putting out a statement which the relatives had now told him would have no effect, and which would in any case bring criticism to bear upon him from other quarters. Mr Blelloch agreed with the difficulty of drafting an unequivocal statement; the experiences of last Christmas had demonstrated the immensity of such a task.
19. Mrs Hodgins ventured to suggest that if the hunger-strike were brought to an end, the blanket protest would cease too. The Sheehan sisters disagreed and envisaged hunger-strikers going on to the blanket protest whilst waiting for any promised improvements to be made. One of the Sheehan sisters asked if the Minister would be prepared to talk to ex-hunger strikers who were on the blanket protest, rather than fully conforming. The Minister said that under controlled conditions he would, but that he would have to choose how he went about it.
20. The meeting closed after nearly two hours with the relatives urging the Minister to seriously consider making some form of statement. The Minister said that he had been happy to meet them, at their request, and he advised them to say, if they were asked about what had taken place once they were outside the meeting, that they had put their points fully and that he had listened. This they agreed to do.

David Brooker

DAVID BROOKER
Private Secretary
29 September 1981

CC	PS/SOS (B&L)	M
	PS/Lord Gowrie (L)	M
	PS/PUS (B&L)	M
	Mr Blelloch	
	Mr Wyatt	
	Mr Palmer ✓	
	Mr Doyne Ditmas	
	Mr Jackson	
	Mr Harrington	M

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