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21 AUG 1981

cc: PS/SOS (B & L)
PS/PUS (B & L)
Mr Blelloch
Mr Moriarty
Mr Wyatt
Mr Buxton
Mr Doyne Ditmas
Mr Corbett
Mr Blatherwick

Mr Palmer

REPORT OF INQUIRY INTO ESCAPE FROM HMP BELFAST

1. In your minute of 20 August you say (in paragraph 5) that the issue of publication of the report is not clear-cut. You go on to indicate a compromise between full publication and none.
2. While it is the normal practice of the Home Office to publish a report on an incident of this sort I think there is an argument for our taking a different course and issuing simply the statement by the Minister of State without the summary of main findings.
3. The Chief Inspector makes the point that HMP Belfast contains a concentration of dangerous and determined men of a kind unknown within any single establishment in England and Wales. He then goes on to indicate the weaknesses in security which exist within the prison and the measures which should be taken to remedy these weaknesses.
4. I am firmly of the view that we should not indicate publicly the weaknesses and measures to remedy the weaknesses; and public criticism, however justified, of the prison staff in general is not likely to help morale.
5. In summary I would be inclined to issue the Minister's statement and subsequently to resist any criticism of failure to publish the report itself on the grounds that it is not in our interests to highlight security weaknesses or the steps which have been taken to eliminate those weaknesses.

D GILLILAND

21 August 1981

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~~E.R. CONFIDENTIAL~~ CONFIDENTIAL

21 AUG 1981

DUS(B)/20/8

PS/MR ALISON (L & B) - M

Copy to:
PS/S of S (L & B) - M
PS/PUS (L & B) - M
Mr Moriarty - M
Mr Palmer
Mr Wyatt
Mr Buxton
Mr Doyne-Ditmas
Mr Gilliland
Mr Corbett - M
Mr Blatherwick

REPORT OF INQUIRY INTO ESCAPE FROM IMP BELFAST

Mr Palmer's recommendation that we should make a short statement soon seems to me absolutely right. But that proposition and his drafts raised four points in my mind which I thought it might be helpful to register:-

- (a) Do we, as recommended, publish not only a short statement but a summary of main findings? The latter can be expected to cause us a fair amount of trouble but it seems to me much better to face that as Mr Palmer proposes, openly and promptly, rather than risk having the content of the report squeezed out of us. But you may want to have Mr Gilliland's views on presentation to, and response from, the public;
- (b) assuming we do make an early statement, and certainly if the summary is to be published with it, it is important that the Governors, the Governors Association and the POA are not taken by surprise: Mr Palmer has this in hand;
- (c) the draft does not promise a follow-up statement. I think you will want to consider whether or not this is acceptable in Parliamentary terms. If it is not, then what is proposed still makes good sense ie a short statement now and a more considered one when Parliament resumes by which time we should be able to say more about the report and the extent to which it is being implemented (and if not, why not).

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(c) cont. Irrespective of the above I think there is a case for limiting the first 5 paragraphs of the statement to the background to the report and to what is said in the report itself ie omitting from "and" to "immediately" in the final sentence of paragraph 3 and from "and" to "possible" in the last sentence of paragraph 4. The last paragraph then might read something like:

"The report and its recommendations are now being given close and urgent study: indeed, a number of the recommendations are, or have been, implemented already [the Secretary of State will make a further statement in due course when the study has been completed and decisions taken on the full range of recommendations_7.";

(d) we do not say anything about disciplinary action, I assume because, in the light of para 1.11 of the summary none is justified. I think we ought to be clear whether or not this is the position because we shall certainly be asked when the statement is made if it is not made clear in the statement itself.

J. N. Blelloch

J N BLELLOCH
DUS(B)

20 August 1981

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Miss Summons



PS/MR ALISON (B & L)

REPORT OF INQUIRY INTO ESCAPE FROM HMP BELFAST

1. The Report by HM Chief Inspector (Mr Pearce, CBE) has now been received and a copy is attached below. (Not to all).
2. The normal practice of the Home Office in such cases is to publish the Report and for the Home Secretary to make a statement in the House giving his reactions to it.
3. In this case we began by the Secretary of State making a statement to the House on 11 June announcing his invitation to the Chief Inspector to undertake an Inquiry into the escape. There is an expectation therefore that the Secretary of State will make a further statement on receipt of the Report and no doubt also that the Report will be published.
4. Despite the absence of the Secretary of State on leave and the Recess I think the advantage lies in Mr Alison making a short statement now rather than delay until the House returns and I attach a draft.
5. The issue of publication is not so clear cut. Because of the detailed security issues covered in the Report I am sure that the Report should NOT be published in full and the Chief Inspector endorses this view.
6. There is however a compromise between full publication and none. Chapter 1 of the Report (Summary of Main Findings) has been written in such a way that it might be published without endangering security at the Prison and the Minister may consider that publication of Chapter 1 would be in accordance with the Home Office general practice of publication except where security considerations supervene. I recommend this course.

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7. Action has already been taken to implement certain recommendations and urgent consideration is being given to others. I will send forward shortly an analysis of the Report's recommendations and the Department's responses for the Minister's information.

B D PALMER

20 August 1981

cc PS/S OF S (B & L) M
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Mr Blelloch
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Mr Blatherwick

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DEBET STATEMENT BY MR ALISON, MINISTER OF STATE, NORTHERN IRELAND
OFFICE

REPORT ON THE ESCAPE FROM HM PRISON, BELFAST - 10 JUNE 1981

On 11 June 1981, the Secretary of State asked Mr William H Pearce, CBE, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, to conduct an inquiry into those aspects of the security arrangements at HM Prison, Belfast, relevant to the escape of 8 prisoners on 10 June. Mr Pearce's report has now been received.

Because of the detailed references to security measures at Belfast Prison in the report it is not proposed to publish it in full. A summary of the main findings of the report is however published with this statement 7.

The main conclusion of Mr Pearce's report was that the escape resulted both from failure of the security system and from human error. He specifically referred to the lack of adequate and precise written guidance and instructions on security matters at all levels both within the prison, from the Governor to officers, and outside, from the Northern Ireland Office to prison staff, as well as insufficiently rigorous application of the existing security procedures by staff in the prison. Mr Pearce has made a number of recommendations to rectify these deficiencies and action has already been taken to implement certain recommendations immediately.

On the most serious issue which was the acquisition of firearms by prisoners, the inquiry did not establish with certainty the route the weapons took but recommendations intended to substantially improve the security precautions against the introduction of firearms, including more rigorous searching procedures for professional visitors, have been made and will be put into effect as soon as possible.

The report also concluded that while there was a collective failure by staff of all grades to accord security its proper priority, neither

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the Governor nor any other individual member of staff at Belfast Prison was held to be particularly at fault. Indeed, the report commended the courage of unarmed members of staff who by their individual actions during the escape reflected great credit upon the Prison Service as a whole.

While as I have said a number of the recommendations have already been implemented others, involving staffing, physical or organisational changes are being followed up urgently, with the objective of significantly improving the security arrangements at HM Prison, Belfast.

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CHAPTER 1: SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

1.01 There can be no denying the gravity of the escape of the eight prisoners on 10th June. They were accused of the most serious offences of terrorism, and seven have since been sentenced, in their absences, to imprisonment for eighteen years or more. Public confidence must have been shaken. The escape was widely acknowledged at the time as carrying the hallmarks of a thoroughly planned and carefully coordinated operation, which had been some considerable time in preparation. Nothing we have found contradicts this, although it is clear that the escapers enjoyed substantial luck in the execution of their plan. Nevertheless, this cannot reduce the extent of the prison's failure to perform its most fundamental task, that of keeping securely in custody those sent there by the courts.

1.02 Our terms of reference required us to examine those aspects of the prison's security relevant to the escape. We began by reviewing the security procedures in the two areas of the prison which figured prominently in the escape: the facilities for prisoners to receive visits from legal advisers, in which the guns were first produced and the staff overpowered; and the main gate complex through which the escapers fled. However it quickly became clear to us that the reasons for the success of the escape went much wider than this, and we have found it necessary also to examine more general aspects of the security arrangements at the prison. Broadly, we have identified three different kinds of failure in the security arrangements, which enabled the escape to take place: the absence of certain procedures applicable throughout the prison which created an environment in which escape became possible; weaknesses within the laid-down procedures in the areas directly involved on 10th June; and omissions on the part of staff to apply existing procedures sufficiently rigorously. The escape thus resulted both from failure of the security system and from human error.

1.03 To set these failings in context we should record at this stage that we have been struck by the enormity of the security task with which HMP Belfast is faced. The prison contains a concentration of dangerous and determined men of a kind unknown within any single establishment in England and Wales, but which is an inevitable result of the current troubles in Northern Ireland. The design of the prison is antiquated, and despite the recent addition of modern electronic security devices the structure is inherently obstructive to the task of containing securely determined men able to call upon outside assistance. The staff themselves are comparatively junior, having seen a very considerable expansion of their Service during the 1970s, with a consequent dilution of management experience. They have to face intimidation as a matter of routine, both inside the prison, and to their homes and families. Nor are these idle threats, as the depressingly frequent murders of prison staff have shown. These difficulties are very real, and must be kept in mind when considering how the prison has performed its security duties. They cannot, of course, excuse the escape on 10th June; indeed, they make it the more important that there should be effective security procedures in use.

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1.04 The most significant fault in the prison security was the failure to prevent the acquisition of firearms by prisoners. There are almost a dozen ways in which weapons might be smuggled into the prison, and, since we could not establish with certainty which route the weapons took, we have examined the precautions taken in each case. We are reasonably satisfied with the procedures covering most routes of entry: for example, the searching of the very considerable flow of friends and relatives who visit prisoners, and of the parcels which are sent in, seemed to us to be thoroughly and thoughtfully carried out, although we have suggested that one or two loopholes should be closed. However, we identified substantial weaknesses elsewhere, in particular in the examination of goods delivered to the prison by outside contractors, in the searching of prisoners on initial reception, and in the searching of those who visit the prison in a professional capacity, including legal advisers. We have made several recommendations intended to prevent the introduction of firearms through those routes in the future, including more rigorous searching procedures for professional visitors.

1.05 The prisoners began their escape from the visiting area used for visits from legal advisers. They chose to do so, we believe, because this facility offers two advantages to would-be escapers: it is close to the main gate, and it is possible for prisoners from different divisions to arrange to be in this visiting area at the same time because legal advisers may specify who whom they wish to interview. These facets of the professional visiting facility present risks which cannot be eliminated entirely, but the installation of an additional manned grille gate would make egress more difficult in any future escape attempt, and tighter controls on the number of prisoners brought down from the divisions would limit the scope for coordinated action by prisoners. However, the prisoners who escaped on 10th June were able to exploit these weaknesses to the full because of poor organisation and management in the visiting area. In particular, staff were successfully conditioned to regard the threat to security as low, so that lazy practices developed. As a result, the escapers were able to plan and coordinate their escape and to take staff by surprise. We have, therefore, suggested improvements to the organisation and management of the professional visits area.

1.06 The main gate of a prison should provide an effective barrier to unarmed prisoners seeking to escape, and should at least inflict delay upon those who have weapons. This was not the case on 10th June, largely because of the design of the gate. It is old-fashioned and manually opened by staff with keys. Crucially, the officer with the key to the inner main gate was accessible to the prisoners because he was stationed in the forecourt. We believe that a prison with a population such as HMP Belfast's requires electronically locked gates operated from a secure point, so that staff cannot be forced to open them. We have recommended this, and in the meantime suggested that the officers controlling access should do so from the area between the gates. However, the escape was aided by the comparatively low staffing levels at the time concerned. We have made recommendations about the staffing and management of the gate, designed to ensure that sufficient staff are on duty at all times.

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1.07 The prison alarm was not sounded until ten minutes had elapsed since the first member of staff was held at gunpoint, by which time the prisoners were crossing Crumlin Road. As a result, concerted action by staff was impossible and the Security Forces were denied the opportunity to intervene. However, we were most impressed by the courage of unarmed members of staff who, without warning, found themselves face to face with escapers carrying firearms. Several staff resisted the prisoners, three officers, acting individually, tackled them until struck down or subdued and others pursued them outside the prison until firing started. We think these individual acts reflect great credit upon the Prison Service.

1.08 Nevertheless, the delay in raising the alarm must be regarded as a failure of the alarm system. It occurred for three reasons: alarm buttons in key positions were left unmanned, either because they were badly sited or because staff had come to disregard their importance; staff who became aware that an escape was taking place did not think to raise the alarm; and the Emergency Control Room was slow to activate the klaxon when an alarm button was eventually pressed. We have recommended a review of the siting and operation of the alarm system to remedy the practical defects. However, the failure to man or operate alarm buttons seems to us to be symptomatic of a more general and rather surprising naivety in security matters common to many staff of all grades. We felt that there was a lack of awareness of the importance in security matters of alertness, attention to detail and the rigorous application of routine procedures. This tendency was also apparent in the susceptibility of staff in the professional visits area to conditioning, and in the bad practices that had developed in the main gate and elsewhere. We feel that it is essential to reinforce the basic security skills and attitudes among staff in HMP Belfast, and we have recommended that this should be done through a locally conducted programme of staff training.

1.09 We are concerned that an escape of this magnitude, involving such high risk prisoners, should have been possible at all. It is a central tenet of security that those prisoners who present the greatest risk should receive the most attention. We accept that HMP Belfast holds very many dangerous men, but even among these the escapers ranked high, and had there been an effective system to monitor and control such members of the prison's population we doubt if an escape of this magnitude could have taken place. We have, therefore, recommended the introduction of a new top security category into which would fall those inmates who represent the gravest danger to the public and who have the greatest capacity to attempt to escape. These prisoners would be subject to particularly rigorous searching and monitoring, including central control of their movement around the prison. To assist in forecasting the build up of top risk prisoners in the vulnerable professional visits facility (as well as to improve the general control of movement to and from that area), we have also recommended the introduction of a requirement for legal advisers to give notice, before arrival at the prison, of their intention to visit and of the names of their clients.

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1.0 One reason for the patchy application of security procedures is the variable quality of the written guidance available to staff. Some operational orders have been prepared and are broadly satisfactory, but are not readily available for staff to refer to; others are contradictory; and other, including some job descriptions and instructions on key matters such as searching procedures, are absent. We have recommended consolidation of operational orders to provide clear, easily available, guidance for staff. However, action is required on this front within the Northern Ireland Office too. The Service as a whole has no Manual or Standing Orders on security, there is no agreed system for the routine dissemination of instructions on security matters, and the practice has developed of issuing ad hoc guidance to Governors over the telephone without written confirmation. It is therefore not surprising that the staff of HMP Belfast have become confused. We feel that the Operations Division in Prison Department needs to be given the staff to enable them to provide considered and authoritative written guidance and instruction on security matters, and, although we may be stretching our terms of reference a little in doing so, we have suggested how the relevant divisions of Prison Department might be reorganised so that this can be achieved.

1.11 Finally, our terms of reference led us to consider how far the execution of their responsibility for security by individual prison staff had contributed to the success of the escape. The Governor is, of course, ultimately responsible for ensuring the existence of appropriate security routines and their effective application. However, we do not feel that he, or any other individual member of staff, can be held to be particularly at fault. Rather, the escape resulted from a collective failure, by staff of all grades, to accord security its proper priority. That is why many of our recommendations are directed towards the establishment of heightened security awareness, backed up by sound and practical procedures.

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