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16 - 1 SEP 1981

PRIVATE OFFICE

PS/SOS (L & B) - M
 PS/Mr Alison (L) - M
 PS/PUS (L & B) - M
 PS/Mr Bell
 Mr Blelloch
 Mr Marshall OR
 Mr Wyatt
 Mr Moriarty - M
 Mr Doyne-Ditmas
 Mr Palmer
 Mr Gilliland
 Mr Corbett - M
 Mr Jackson
 Mr Blatherwick

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MR ALISON'S MEETING WITH MR OWEN CARRON -
 FRIDAY 28 AUGUST 1981

Mr Carron came to see Mr Alison in Stormont Castle at 3 pm yesterday. Mr Alison was accompanied at the meeting by Mr Blelloch, Mr Palmer and Mr Gilliland. Mr Carron came alone (as had been agreed with him previously).

2. Mr Alison began by saying that he felt bound to ask at the outset - having read Mr Carron's election address - whether he intended to take his seat in the House of Commons and to take the Oath of Allegiance. Mr Carron replied that he could not consider going to Westminster while the hunger strike continued, and he had been elected on a non-attendance basis. He could not commit himself to what his position might be when the hunger strike ended. Mr Alison explained that, while he would do all he could to be helpful, this made it necessary for the Government to reserve its position a little in its dealings with him. It was necessary to bear in mind those of Mr Carron's constituents who would not in effect be represented.

3. Mr Carron accepted this, but did not wish to pursue the point further. He said that he had come to see the Minister in order to impress on him the urgency of a settlement of the hunger strike issue. He believed that a vast amount of support for and goodwill towards the prisoners existed in the community. There was also tremendous pressure on the Government to resolve the issue, internationally and from the broad stream of nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland. He believed that the prisoners were willing to be flexible and that there should be some movement on the part of the Government. Mr Alison assured Mr Carron that the Government fully understood the immense emotional feeling generated by the hunger strike and the last thing that he, or the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State, wanted was for the unnecessary deaths to continue. But the hunger strike was an extreme form of pressure. A democratic Government was not a free agent, but was answerable and responsive to the electorate and could not be 'hijacked' by this form of duress. Nevertheless, the gap between the respective positions of the Government and the hunger strikers did appear to be somewhat less than it had seemed at one time, now that the prisoners had claimed that they were not seeking a differentiated regime.

4. Mr Carron said that the protesting prisoners did see themselves as different from other criminals, because they had been convicted under special legislation and because of the motivation behind the deeds for which they had been convicted. The hunger strike was the culmination of the protest; they saw it as something to which they had been obliged to resort, rather than a means of exerting duress. However, they were prepared to see the regime which they were seeking extended to all prisoners.

5. Mr Alison explained the difficulties which arose over the prisoners' stated wish to do only work in their own H-blocks or wings. Cooking, for example, - which the prisoners had said they were willing to do - was done in central facilities outside the blocks. It would be far-fetched, even if it was considered desirable, to build separate kitchens in each block. Various other activities, such as laundry, vocational training and industrial work, took place outside the blocks. The protesting prisoners' claim that they wanted the same regime for all prisoners was not compatible with their desire to work only in their own blocks. The prison could not be run on such a basis, with no prisoner being required to go outside his own block.

6. Mr Carron wondered if this was then a purely practical problem and if the Government saw a special arrangement for some prisoners, to enable them to remain in their own blocks, as the answer. Mr Alison said that he acknowledged that Northern Ireland prisoners were of a different type to those in Great Britain or elsewhere in Europe because of the exceptionally high proportion of young prisoners serving very long sentences. He believed that this difference was already reflected in the Northern Ireland prison regime - with, for example, 50% remission and own clothes outside working hours. But there could be no differentiation for a particular group within the Northern Ireland regime itself. In any case, he understood that the prisoners were no longer seeking differentiation.

7. Mr Carron said that the prisoners saw segregation as the basic issue. They did not want to be desegregated as in the conforming blocks. In the compounds, the authorities were able to exercise control, and even so there was a better atmosphere there, and a system agreeable to everyone concerned - both prisoners and prison warders. There were statistics to show that prisoners who were released from the compounds were less likely to be convicted again than those emerging from the H-blocks. Mr Alison replied that integration was a policy which the Government believed was valid. It made good practical sense in terms of running prisons efficiently and economically and it was obviously valuable that prisoners should learn to live together. The Gardiner report had criticised the compound system as being a regime which did not allow for the proper exercise of the sentences imposed by the courts. Such a regime did not act as sufficient of a deterrent to those contemplating crime. The statistics on which Mr Carron based his proposition that prisoners leaving the compounds were less likely to re-engage in crime could not be regarded as over-riding.

8. Mr Carron asked if the Government could not state, even privately, what changes it was prepared to make in the prison regime. The H-block issue had to be grappled with; the Government had to agree that the campaign had alienated people from authority. The problem was that the Government would not be specific. Mr Alison replied that the Government had already set out its position publicly. Its position on remission, as he had told the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, was that there was already 20% restoration of lost remission for those who ceased protesting, and in an environment of conformity the possibility of further change was not ruled out. He did not believe that remission was a significant issue between the Government and the protesters. On clothes, the Government had already introduced civilian clothing and out of working hours own clothes were allowed. Further improvement could only mean one thing, but it could not be used to "buy off" the hunger strike. There was no reason to believe that it would do so. However, the important issues were really association and work. Here again, developments were not ruled out.

9. Mr Carron said that the prisoners saw work, association and segregation as intertwined and as the real problem. Why could the Government not spell out precisely what it would do? Mr Alison explained the impossibility of producing a detailed schedule of what work each prisoner could be expected to do. There was a wide range within each type of work; the ICJP had made some suggestions about other types of work, eg charitable work, and the Government had no objection in principle to this; indeed it was always seeking ways to extend the range of work available, but this did not alter the need for the Governor to retain the right to decide who should work where. Mr Carron thought that the prisoners were concerned about the principle of being able to choose, at least in the first instance, to do what they felt they were suited to. Mr Palmer pointed out that prisoners were asked to state their preferences, but this did not mean that they would necessarily be granted, because there was obviously the possibility of too many opting for a particular activity. Mr Alison emphasised that the system could not function if the Governor did not retain control over the disposition of prisoners. Nevertheless every effort was made to "fit round pegs into round holes". Given the endless permutations in the work regime, it was not possible, while the protesters were not prepared to work, for the Government to be specific about what it would do. Mr Carron felt that the Government, being in a position of strength as compared to the prisoners, could afford to show some generosity.

10. Turning to association, Mr Alison pointed out that although the term 'association' referred to specified periods of time when prisoners could mix with a relative degree of freedom, there was also association in practice at other times of day, during work, exercise etc. A prisoner ceasing to protest would find himself with a much greater degree of association than before. Mr Carron asked if the fact that the Government was considering allowing the mixing of prisoners

from the wings of a block did not invalidate the argument about loss of control. In a desegregated, conforming situation this sort of mixing could create control problems. Mr Alison replied that the question of control had been very carefully examined and it had been decided that, subject to some physical adjustments in the block, association between two wings would be acceptable in a conforming situation. Desegregated prisoners already mixed satisfactorily in the conforming blocks.

11. Mr Carron said that the hundreds of prisoners who did not accept segregation saw it as inseparable from the issues of work and association. The policy on segregation created an unnecessary problem in the prison system. Mr Alison repeated that it was a policy to which the Government adhered, and it was accepted by conforming prisoners. He pointed out that it was not in fact one of the 'five demands'. Even without the hunger strike, prisoners who were refusing to work and thus not conforming were in any case segregated. It was certainly not worth their dying over this issue.

12. Mr Carron repeated his request that the Government should spell out what would be allowed and what would not. He did not believe that the exercise of control by the authorities was really an issue. When Mr Alison reminded him of the incompatibility of the prisoners' claim that they were not pressing for a differentiated regime with their refusal to work outside their own blocks, Mr Carron suggested that the statement to the effect that differentiation was not being sought was made so that the Government would not make an issue of the request for a separate status.

13. The meeting, which was calm and friendly throughout, came to an end after about one hour. Mr Alison expressed the hope that a situation would arise when Mr Carron felt that he could attend the House of Commons.

Julie Wright
J H WRIGHT (MISS)
PS/Mr Alison

29 August 1981

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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

William Rickett Esq
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1

Kg. Andrew

| September 1981

Dear Willie

Following Miss Wright's summary of last Friday's meeting (dictated directly to No 10), I attach a copy of the full record of the discussion with Mr Carron.

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins

M W HOPKINS