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MEMORANDUM BY THE PRIME MINISTER AS MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS ON INTERNMENT

1. There has been considerable speculation in the press about the possibility of ending internment, and when I met Mr Heath on 4 February 1972 I was asked whether I saw any early prospects of its being phased out. I replied that I shared the view of the Army that it was vital to get on top of the IRA before making any move in this direction.

2. In spite of the continued bombings and shootings there is ample evidence that the effectiveness of the IRA, especially in the Belfast area where the security forces have recently concentrated their efforts, has been very seriously reduced. The removal from circulation of 700 - 800 members of the two main organizations is creating increasing problems for them in terms both of morale and losses of key personnel. These losses have to some extent been made good, but the officers of some companies have had to be replaced two or three times over and volunteers are now reluctant to come forward. Some units in Belfast have ceased to exist and others have been amalgamated. Several areas have been completely cleared of IRA and increasing pressure is being brought to bear on areas where groups are still active.

3. In Belfast the IRA are particularly short of leadership, experience and technical skill in the use of explosives. Taking the situation in Northern Ireland as a whole, about 140 important members on the wanted list are now in the Irish Republic. The severe dislocation of command and communication systems has left behind something more in the nature of a cell structure, and operations are largely carried out by small active service units, many of them based in the South. It must be added that these are capable of inflicting casualties on the security forces and of maintaining limited attacks on civilian targets for some time to come, especially outside Belfast.

4. There are two answers to the claim that internment has not worked. The first is the fact, already noted, that the IRA presence has been removed from certain areas and that this is continuing; though it is unfortunately true that those who have most to fear from the IRA are least articulate in pointing to the comparative freedom from intimidation which they are beginning to enjoy. Secondly, insofar as internment has not yet succeeded, this is due in no small measure to the fact that there are many people outside the IRA who do not want it to work. They include those who while ostensibly deploring the methods of the IRA have little desire to see the IRA put out of action until some at least of the organization's aims have been achieved.

5. There is little evidence that internment has led to a substantial increase in IRA recruitment. On the contrary, recent arrests indicate that most of those taking part in terrorist attacks were recruited in the period leading up to August of last year. So far as those already interned are concerned, the

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campaign to end internment and the belief that it will succeed keeps their morale higher than is generally the case with men still at large.

6. In spite of successes against the IRA it may still be claimed that the present strategy of attrition offers steadily diminishing returns in terms of opportunities for a political settlement. It may indeed appear to some that efforts to secure a settlement cannot await the prior defeat of the IRA, or even the scaling down of violence to an acceptable level, and that there are greater chances of terminating violence by putting internment into reverse than by pursuing it to the bitter end. In pursuit of this argument it might be argued that internees should now be released at the rate of, say, 50 per month and that the rate might be increased as the situation improved; conversely that it should be cut back if there were no improvement, and that all releases should stop if a further deterioration occurred.

Alternatively there might be a programme of releases geared to the progress of talks with the Northern Ireland opposition. The possibility of phasing out internment in this way has been studied, but is open to the following objections:-

- (1) All internees are, on the evidence available, either members of the IRA or otherwise involved in terrorism, and there is no pool of mere political activists from which releases can be made. There is, therefore, the likelihood that internees released as a political gesture would return to their previous activities and so repair the substantial damage which has been inflicted on both factions of the IRA since 9 August 1971.
- (2) If internees were released prematurely, ie before the IRA were defeated, the prime targets for retaliatory action would undoubtedly be the members of the Special Branch of the RUC: these are for the most part known to those internees whom they have arrested or interrogated.
- (3) The IRA would regard any programme of release for political reasons as an important success. It would also be so regarded by members of the Security Forces and the general public. The IRA could, therefore, dictate future terms.
- (4) Any decision to make no further arrests would be regarded by the IRA as a still greater achievement; they could be expected to take the opportunity to recoup their losses and to equip themselves to intensify operations at a date of their own choosing. Those on the run would be encouraged to return to their units.
- (5) The process of internment has provided, and continues to provide, a flow of intelligence on the membership, resources and plans of the IRA. If this flow were interrupted the IRA could re-group with impunity.

7. The Joint Security Committee have endorsed these conclusions and have accepted

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that security grounds rule out any releases other than through the machinery of the Advisory Committee. Any other course would it is felt carry with it a serious risk of the prolongation of the terrorist campaign.

8. It is difficult to visualize any solid advantages which might outweigh these security objections. It may well be that internment continues to be the main cause of Catholic alienation and that it has attracted to the IRA the sympathy of sections of the Catholic population which would otherwise have no use for terrorism. But it can hardly be supposed that the confidence of the minority is to be won back by letting the gunman loose to reimpose their will in areas from which they have been expelled.

9. Nor is it easy to see how the ending of internment before the IRA are defeated can in any way assist towards a political solution. The opposition have no control over the IRA and therefore no means of bringing terrorism itself under control. And even if a total or partial ending of internment enabled political talks to start a fully armed terrorist organization in the background with its ranks re-filled would inevitably dominate the course of any negotiations.

10. If it is accepted that there is no painless way of ending internment it will be necessary to say so publicly and to face the unfavourable reactions which will inevitably follow. In order to minimize these reactions certain steps can, however, be taken -

- (1) The need for internment to continue may have to be spelt out more effectively. For this purpose it is proposed to give as much publicity as possible to a general defence of the policy and to the correcting of some of the grosser forms of misrepresentation to which it has been subjected. It may also be possible to include proposals for ending internment as soon as the IRA campaign ceases.
- (2) There will be greater stress on the easing of conditions under which internees live, including better welfare facilities and provision for rehabilitation.
- (3) Amending Regulations have already been drafted and will shortly be made which will remove some criticism of existing procedures as being too arbitrary.
- (4) As indicated in a separate memorandum, legislation is under consideration which would have the effect of putting the Special Powers Acts into suspense on termination of the present emergency.

Stormont Castle

18 February 1972