

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/127/1058
Creation Date(s):	20 August 1981
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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H-Blocks - Some Considerations

1. On the H-Blocks issue the Government is now at a cross-roads at which it may adopt a variety of courses of action. Whilst the H-Blocks issue is not the focus of attention at the forthcoming conference it seems desirable from a Departmental point of view to take stock of the situation as we perceive it, to define in a perhaps somewhat impressionistic way the impact that it has made and to consider some possibilities that might be open to the Government. In so doing it is recognised that this Department is not alone in holding a brief on the H-Blocks issue and that other views and strategies may also be made available. This note is intended to complement Mr. Neligan's note which is attached.

2. The most fundamental question that must be considered is whether the policy being pursued by the Government is the correct one and probably the more effective in the circumstances.

Looking at it at its best it can be asserted, perhaps simplistically, that the policy and activity that has been pursued have in the first instance not succeeded because the hunger strike still continues and in the second instance have failed because, for perhaps different reasons, a great many of the parties concerned are not just the British Government but also the IRA, the nationalist and republican community in Ireland. In addition this situation has been complicated by a

1. General Notes on H-Blocks issue

(i) H-Blocks - some considerations

(ii) Memorandum by D. Neligan

Government which of necessity must be relatively complex and comprise more elements than the simply stated policies of the two main protagonists, viz the British Government and the IRA. In the Government's efforts to steer a fragile course between humanitarian concern for the dying prisoners, criticism of the British Government for its failure to see (and yet not capitulate) and an outright criticism of the IRA, this confusion may well be inevitable.

3. When one considers the H-Blocks hunger strike issue at this stage as compared to when it began it seems as if the problem and the cause have now been reversed and the focus of our policy may therefore need to be changed. When the hunger-strike campaign commenced the cause of the problem was the fact that prisoners were in the process of self-immolation and were likely to make significant gains in terms of IRA propaganda. The problem was that the British Government could not see its way to recognising the danger and dealing with the situation appropriately. Government policy was rightly therefore directed at the British Government in these circumstances. As of now however the situation is reversed. The problem now is not so much the fact that there are prisoners involved in self-immolation - the impact here in any event may be reducing - or that the British Government is refusing to yield to their demands. Although both these points are of course of concern, but that the provisional IRA have in fact already made the substantial gains which were threatened and now pose a stronger challenge to our institutions than for many years. The cause of this happening which at this stage is secondary, is the unwillingness of the British Government to take up at an early stage to the prospects of this becoming the reality that it now is. Mr. Neligan's attached paper makes the point that the IRA have succeeded

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1. On the H-Blocks issue the Government is now at a cross-roads at which it may adopt a variety of courses of action. While the H-Blocks issue is not the focus of attention at the forthcoming conference it seems desirable from a Departmental point of view to take stock of the situation as we perceive it, to outline in a perhaps somewhat impressionistic way the impact that it has made and to consider some possibilities that might be open to the Government. In so doing it is recognised that this Department is not alone in holding a brief on the H-Blocks issue and that other views and strategies may also be made available. This note is intended to complement Mr. Neligan's note which is attached.
2. The most fundamental question that must be considered is whether the policy being pursued by the Government is the correct one and secondly the most effective in the circumstances. Looking at it at its most negative it can be suggested, perhaps simplistically, that the policy and activity that has been pursued have in the first instance not succeeded (because the hunger strike still continues) and in the second instance have antagonised, for perhaps different reasons, a great many of the parties to whom this matter is of concern, not just the British Government but significant sections of both the nationalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland. In addition this antagonism has been compounded (or perhaps even caused) by a level of confusion. People seem to find it difficult to differentiate and to clearly distinguish the policy of the Government which of necessity must be relatively complex and comprise more elements than the simply stated policies of the two main protagonists, viz the British Government and the PIRA. In the Government's efforts to steer a fragile course between humanitarian concern for the dying prisoners, criticism of the British Government for its failure to act (and yet not capitulate) and an outright criticism of the PIRA, this confusion may well be inevitable.
3. When one considers the H-Blocks hunger strike issue at this stage as compared to when it began it seems as if the problem and the cause have now been reversed and the focus of our policy may therefore need to be changed. When the hunger-strike campaign commenced the cause of the problem was the fact that prisoners were in the process of self-immolation and were likely to make significant gains in terms of IRA propaganda. The problem was that the British Government could not see its way to recognising the dangers and dealing with the situation appropriately. Government policy was rightly therefore directed at the British Government in these circumstances. As of now, however, the situation is reversed. The problem now is not so much the fact that there are prisoners involved in self-immolation - the impact here in any event may be reducing - or that the British Government is refusing to yield to their demands (although both these points are of course of concern) but that the Provisional IRA may in fact already have made the substantial gains which were threatened and now pose a stronger challenge to our institutions than for many years. The cause of this happening (which at this stage is secondary) is the unwillingness of the British Government to face up at an early stage to the prospects of this becoming the reality that it now is. Mr. Neligan in the attached paper makes the point that the PIRA have succeeded

in setting back the assertion and acceptance everywhere of the cause of a united Ireland on a basis of reconciliation and consent.

4. In Northern Ireland the PIRA now occupy the centre of both the military and political stages and this relatively advantageous position is not something which an organisation like the PIRA is likely to yield easily. Further action by the PIRA when the hunger strike ends can be contemplated in order to occupy this centrality of position in Northern Ireland political scene. In this respect Mr. Neligan makes the point in his note that the prison protest will continue indefinitely and it will be in the form of a hunger strike as long as the IRA so decide. The Provisionals have made considerable gains both domestically, and possibly internationally as well, although the full extent of these gains in the latter context and particularly in the U.S. will take some time to become apparent. The rise to prominence and centrality of the PIRA is now the real problem and the solution to the H-Blocks hunger strike issue, when it eventually comes, will not be a solution to this. The Government will have to consider for their part how they are going to counteract these gains and a determined effort will sooner or later have to be made in this regard.
5. From the Government's point of view it is indeed very difficult to counteract these significant gains at the moment. To attempt to do so would be to wade deeper into the fray and run the risk of heightening emotion. The question is, however, given the likelihood of continued PIRA attempts to maintain itself as the focus of attention in Northern Ireland whether by hunger strikes or other means, how and when the Government can take counteractive steps for their part to stem the successes of the PIRA. There seems little point in relying on the British Government to do the right thing or rely on them to provide the Government with opportune circumstances to confront this.
6. The Government have maintained a consistently critical approach to the British authorities handling of the issue. It must be considered whether this is getting us anywhere, whether it may be causing damage to the good relations between the two countries and whether this issue and the circumstances behind it is one on which we would wish to let our relationship founder. It is obviously difficult to strike a balance between ensuring the need to maintain good relations with the British (which is obviously essential in the long term) and yet encouraging the British Government to face up to the situation and effect a solution. Mr. Neligan in the attached note makes the point that the limits of ingenuity and persistence have been reached and indeed the limits of prudence exceeded in our efforts so far to point the way towards honourable compromise. In these circumstances the Government has to be concerned and consider carefully the means by which it is going to exert further pressure on the British Government in the event of the hunger strike continuing. In saying all this however one should not exaggerate British Government sensitivity. There is an understanding on their part of our Government's delicate situation and the peculiarity of the circumstances at the moment. It may well be regarded that our activities on this front are nothing less than consistent with the well founded fears of a country that has been affected by this issue and indeed the whole

Northern Ireland issue for a long time. There is the point that the more legitimate our interest in this issue is seen to be by the British Government and the harder we exert it, the more legitimate will be seen to be our interest and involvement in the broader dimensions of the Northern Ireland problem. On balance it may well be that we could yet go a long way in subjecting the British Government to pressure without in any way seriously damaging our relationship. What we may have to be careful about however is the means by which further pressure on the British Government is exerted.

7. The more public pressure that is put on the British Government coupled with public criticism of the PIRA the more likely there is to be public confusion about the issue nationally and internationally, and the more likely also that Mrs. Thatcher's standing on the issue will harden. According to most observers Mrs. Thatcher becomes more rigid according as the public criticism of her becomes more audible. Consideration has also to be given to the future effects of Government policy on attitudes domestically and whether through overt and active criticism of the British Government the Government may unwittingly generate a sympathy for the hunger strikers and engrain in peoples' minds a suspicion of the British Government which may be difficult to counteract.
8. These latter points are also of importance when one speaks of internationalising the issue. If this means simply keeping friendly governments well informed this is hardly objectionable and indeed is a self-evident function of the Government's diplomatic services. If on the other hand it means using Third Parties to exert pressure on the British Government this may not only be getting Ireland's relative importance to these countries vis a vis Britain out of proportion but also further harden Mrs. Thatcher's resolve. It also calls into question the uniqueness of the relationship that exists between Britain and Ireland. The answer to our concern regarding the problem of the H-Blocks does not lie in internationalising the issue but lies (as we would maintain in respect of all other issues concerning Northern Ireland) between the British and Irish Governments and through our bilateral dealings. The more we seek to involve others the more inadequate will be seen to be the uniqueness of our relationship and the realistic prospects of our acting in concert to solve the Northern Ireland problem generally.
9. In all these circumstances it is not an easy matter to chart a way forward for the future. This note does not suggest a strategy but merely outlines elements which might be borne in mind. The elements include:
 - (i) the Government seeking to restore any ground that may have been lost with the unionist communities in Northern Ireland because of any misunderstanding/disagreement over the Government's position on the H-Blocks
 - (ii) the Government distancing itself still further from the H-Blocks issue and, without of course ceasing to maintain an active interest and desire to see it end, disabusing people of the idea - which has been successfully played by H-Block activists in efforts to discredit the Government - that the Government can in fact solve the issue when the reality is that it cannot.

- (iii) the Government considering how they are now going to confront the real problem identified in this note which is not now the hunger strike as such or the British Government's intransigence but the current popularity of the Provisionals and their centrality both militarily and politically in Northern Ireland and the implications and consequences of this for the Republic. The ending of the hunger strike may or may not be a necessary prelude to any action on this front.
- (iv) Maintaining their pressure on the British Government but in a more private though no less trenchant or determined way and perhaps presenting to them, at an early date, the basis on which the Irish Government sees the problem now as being the rise in strength and popularity of the IRA. (This point about the possible rise in popularity of the PIRA has been made before orally but it may be no harm for the Government to submit to the British authorities a paper on this matter giving their considered view on the disastrous consequences of the H-Blocks issue).

Department of Foreign Affairs

20 August 1981