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① Mr Bell
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DRAFT NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL REVIEW: 28 SEPTEMBER - 11 OCTOBER 1981

A: INTRODUCTION

The period has been dominated by the ending of the hunger strike on 3 October, followed by the Secretary of State's announcement on 6 October of certain changes to the prison regime.

B: PRISONS

2. On 30 September the Secretary of State met Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich and Father Denis Faul for talks in which it was widely understood the hunger strike was discussed. Neither side commented afterwards. Mr Prior in an earlier television interview made clear that the Government did not intend to concede the protestors' five demands but would be prepared to consider further improvements to the prison regime once the fast ended.

3. The announcement of the ending of the hunger strike came on the afternoon of Saturday 3 October with a lengthy statement allegedly from the protesting prisoners saying that they were giving up as a result of "sustained family intervention", and blaming in particular the Catholic Church for a campaign of "back door and public pressuring of families to get them to intervene". The Prime Minister said from Australia that she was "delighted to hear that this waste of life is at an end"; while Mr Prior commented: "The road to and search for peace so cruelly and tragically set back by the hunger strike can now be resumed." This theme was echoed by Dr John Armstrong (Church of Ireland Primate) who welcomed the news with "feelings of relief and hope that we might soon see the dawn of a new era of understanding between the two communities in Northern Ireland". Cardinal O'Fiaich said the ending of the fast provided the authorities with an opportunity to show "generosity and compassion in their attitude to prison reform", while John Hume (SDLP leader) added that it was now "a time for the Government to show magnanimity and to make a serious and positive effort to solve the entire prison crisis". The Taoiseach, Dr Fitzgerald, welcomed the news and called on the IRA to end its campaign of violence. Unionists were more cautious.

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Rev Robert Bradford (UUP) said "It smells of a deal", while Jim Molyneaux (UUP Leader) said although he did not believe a deal had already been struck he hoped the Government "would not make the mistake of rushing into concessions under the threat that the hunger strike will be renewed unless concessions are granted". A DUP spokesman said their party was also "gravely suspicious" and hoped the Government would not be foolish enough to "reward" the IRA with concessions in the prison.

4. In a major statement on 6 October the Secretary of State indicated that it was now time "to heal the deep wounds the fresh divisions caused by the strike both inside and outside the prisons". While making clear that there was no question of a political or military system of administration in the prison, Mr Prior announced a number of developments in the regime applying to all prisoners in Northern Ireland. These were:

- Clothes. Prisoners will in future be able to wear their own clothing at all times.
- Remission. Prisoners who have lost remission as a penalty for certain protest action will after 3 months of full conformity with Prison Rules regain up to 50% of the lost remission.
- Association. Some provision will be made for prisoners in adjacent wings of H-blocks to share association in recreation rooms and exercise areas.

The Secretary of State noted that he was putting forward these reforms "in the spirit of reconciliation" as a contribution to the wider task of "creating a better future for the people of Northern Ireland".

5. Reactions came quickly. On the Unionist side Dr Paisley predictably tried to exploit the statement to whip up emotive fears of capitulation. After a stormy meeting with the Secretary of State on 6 October he described the measures as "a complete sell-out to those engaged in the campaign of murder against the Protestant community". The Secretary of State had "won the war but lost the peace". On the same evening 11 DUP councillors walked out in protest from a reception for Council leaders which Mr Prior was giving at Hillsborough Castle.

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Other Unionist leaders echoed Paisley's line: Jim Molyneaux (UUP) accusing the Government of "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory". (In contrast John McMichael - head of the UDA's political front group - was reported as welcoming reforms "which benefitted all prisoners".) However in private there has been little suggestion from Unionist politicians that the prison changes are an issue on which they will go to the wall, and many observers discounted Paisley's reaction as a predictable act of expediency.

6. The Catholic community received the 6 October measures with widespread relief and approbation. Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Daly publicly described the statement as welcome and timely, while John Hume (SDLP) spoke of a "positive response" from the Government. It is widely expected among Catholics that the prisoners will accept the proposed changes and terminate their protest; if they do not, they will find sympathy for any further action hard to come by. For PSF, Garry Adams commented disingenuously that:

"Once again, changes in the British prison policy have been won by the efforts of Republican political prisoners. Whether those changes are enough to end the prison protest remains to be seen."

C: POLITICAL

7. On 29 September at the Labour Party Annual Conference in Brighton a motion calling for the re-unification of Ireland by consent as the Party's long term policy was passed with an overwhelming majority. Reactions in NI were muted, and the decision seemed to bring only a modest and temporary chill to Unionist spines. Seamus Mallon (SDLP deputy leader) was predictably enthusiastic, describing the decision as "a very significant development in British politics". John Cushnahan (General Secretary, Alliance) said the move merely represented a return to the policy previously held by Labour while in opposition; and Ian Paisley (DUP leader) commented that a large number of Labour MPs had held this view for a long time. He added, however, "If a Government at Westminster said that we/re all going to join a United Ireland, then the Unionist people would just not wear it."

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8. The previous day, 28 September, the Secretary of State was greeted by H-block protestors when he arrived at Londonderry Guildhall to meet the Lord Mayor and Councillors. He borrowed the demonstrators' microphone and told them that he had come to Northern Ireland to try to bring peace to the community. He later indicated to the councillors that he was concerned by high unemployment, and his main aim and immediate objective was to get the economy on its feet, as well as finding a political settlement.

D: INTERNATIONAL

9. The Taoiseach's commitment on 27 September to try to remove "sectarian" elements in the Republic's Constitution and laws (including the "territorial claim") in order to make the 26 counties more attractive to Northern Protestants (reported in NIPR(81)18) has continued to cause remarkably little stir in the North. The Secretary of State said in a TV interview on 29 September that he welcomed Dr Fitzgerald's remarks in so far as they had any bearing on the Northern Ireland scene. In contrast with the grudging reactions of Unionist politicians the changes were welcomed by a group of 6 Unionists (non-elected professional figures not linked to any political party) who travelled to Dublin on 8 October to meet both Dr FitzGerald and Mr Haughey (Fianna Fail leader) to present a document entitled "The Unionist Case". However, they added that it would be wrong to suggest that Northern Unionists would consent to Irish unity if such changes were made.

10. In a Senate debate on 9 October the Fianna Fail amendment repudiated "the Taoiseach's deplorable and unfounded allegations of sectarianism in our laws and in the administration of our affairs", and condemned "the Taoiseach's divisive statements which have damaged the cause of a United Ireland based on reconciliation and a respect for the many different traditions in this island". Mr Haughey also personally attacked Dr FitzGerald, accusing him of trying to placate Unionists and seeking to give legal validity to partition. The Taoiseach replied by saying the present negative attitude of Fianna Fail to changes in the Constitution was out of line with the views of all previous leaders of that party, as well as leaders of the Catholic Hierarchy.

11. In the North Unionists continued to carp. Ian Paisley called the

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Taoiseach's proposals "an attempt to show the acceptable face of Dublin at the next Anglo-Irish talks" and added that the Taoiseach had "a pup's chance" of bringing in reforms as the Church and Fianna Fail were lined up against him. Mr Paisley's deputy, Peter Robinson, and James Molyneaux (UUP leader) dismissed the proposals as matters purely of interest to the Republic with no bearing on Northern Ireland.

E: MISCELLANEOUS

12. SDLP. In a by-election on 30 September to the Newry and Mourne District Council the SDLP runner was comfortably defeated by an H-block candidate (the father of McCreesh, a deceased hunger striker). Subsequently An Phoblacht (the PSF newspaper) published what was alleged to be a detailed account of discussions among the SDLP leadership at a recent seminar, which painted a pessimistic picture of the Party's finances and organisation. The article also quoted John Hume as saying that if the SDLP were in government, they would have to introduce internment as a means of dealing with the PIRA. The account was dismissed as "palpable nonsense" and "a complete fantasy" by Hume and other SDLP leaders.

13. Unionist Mission to USA. It was announced on 30 September that four leading Unionists - Ian Paisley MP, Peter Robinson MP, Robert Bradford MP and John Taylor MEP - would be visiting the USA for 14 days in November in order to "tell the truth about Ulster" and counter "the well-organised IRA propaganda network" in the USA. During their visit they hope to set up "friends of Ulster" cells to carry on the work. The four are inviting donations from the public to finance their trip. It has been suggested privately that there are divided views in the UUP on the advisability of Bradford and Taylor joining forces with Paisley in this venture.

14. De Lorean. It was announced from 10 Downing Street on 4 October that Scotland Yard had been asked to investigate the affairs of the De Lorean Motor Company following allegations by Mr Nicholas Winterton MP. Amid much media speculation Mr De Lorean strongly protested that no financial impropriety had occurred and indicated that the affair could endanger jobs at his West Belfast factory. On 6 October the Solicitor General described the police inquiries as "routine".

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