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NOTE OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND THE ASSEMBLY SECURITY COMMITTEE IN STORMONT CASTLE ON 11 OCTOBER 1983

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The Secretary of State met the Assembly Security and Home Affairs Committee on 11 October to discuss the escape from the Maze Prison on 25 September. Those present were:

Secretary of State
Mr Scott
Mr Palmer
Mr Buxton
Mr Merifield
Mr Templeton
Mr Lyon

Mr Maginnis
Mr Campbell
Mr Passmore
The Reverend Ian Foster
Mr Mawhinney
Mr Cook
Mr Gaston
Mr Douglas
Mr Seawright

Mr Kennedy
Mr Wolstencroft

The Secretary of State said that he had seen Sir James Hennessey, who was conducting the inquiry into the escape, on 10 October. Sir James had started work on his inquiry on 27 September. He had a team of ten, the full resources of HM Inspectorate in the UK. They were highly experienced. They fully accepted the seriousness of the situation and the many items on which they would have to report. Their work would necessarily take some time. The Assembly Committee had sent Sir James a large number of questions about the escape. These well illustrated the complexity of the inquiry. Sir James would take them into account. The Secretary of State intended to publish as much of Sir James's report as possible, subject to any necessary security restrictions. He assured the Committee that immediate action would be taken on any deficiencies which Sir James or the Department's own enquiries revealed.

Mr Maginnis said that the Committee did not at this stage expect detailed answers to their questions. But he was most disturbed by the treatment the Committee had received in response to their request for a meeting. The Committee received no formal invitation to see the Secretary of State until 5 October. But informal discussions had gone on with another party who had failed to keep them informed. He hoped in future for more frank relations with the Committee and for a more appropriate recognition of their position.

The Secretary of State firmly refuted the complaint. Ministers were responsible to Parliament for security, and it was entirely appropriate

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that Mr Scott should have briefed Backbench Members. The Secretary of State had been asked to meet the party leaders following the escape. They had refused to see him jointly, and he had seen them separately on 27 September. If they decided they wished to see him as party leaders rather than as members of the Security Committee, that was a matter for them. But he was not prepared to see the Committee and members of individual parties about the same matters at the same time. Given, however, the impasse, it was entirely appropriate that the person to whom Mr Maginnis had referred should make representations in the interests of the Assembly and seek to resolve the problem.

Prison Matters

In discussion of the prison issues arising from the escape, the following points were made:

(i) Area Searches

Mr Campbell said that since the escape, he had been disturbed by reports of explosives and other items being found at Magilligan Prison. Security should be tightened to prevent smuggling in arms. The Secretary of State said that everything was being done to prevent unauthorised articles being brought into prisons. The fact that some had got through was worrying, although recent finds should provide some reassurance. The supply of handguns in the Maze escape would be looked into by Sir James and the lessons would be learned for the Maze and the other prisons.

(ii) Searching of personnel

Members of the Committee suggested that search procedures should be tightened up for both visitors and prison officers. Those, particularly for officers, were very casual. Mr Scott said that rub-down searches were required for all who entered the prison.

(iii) Prison Staff

The Secretary of State confirmed that Sir James' inquiry would extend to the selection and vetting

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of staff. In reply to a question from Mr Mawhinney, he said that no one employed in the Prison Service at the Maze had been suspended following the escape, but they would be ready to act quickly in the light of the findings of the inquiry.

(iv) Resources

The Secretary of State provided figures for the three financial years from 1981/82 for the staff and operating costs and the capital costs of the NI Prison Service. He gave figures also for the prison staff and civilian industrial instructors employed in September in each of the last three years, including the number employed at the Maze cellular. These figures would be made available to the Committee's secretariat. They showed a considerable increase in staff and resources over the last three years. Subject to confirmation, there had been no changes in the terms of service of prison officers during that period, and the average number of hours of overtime had remained high at fifteen. It was necessary to balance the resources available with the sometimes excessive demands of prison officers, but there was nothing to suggest that the Government had denied resources to the prisons.

(v) Equipment

Mr Passmore asked whether the prison had available to it the most modern equipment, including an emergency button to close the main gates. Mr Scott said that these questions, and the use of CCTV would be a matter for Sir James' inquiry, but the Department did its best to respond to requests from governors for new equipment.

(vi) Evidence to Inquiry

The Secretary of State said that each prisoner had been given an opportunity to put evidence to Sir James' inquiry. If public representatives

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wished to give evidence they should approach Sir James.

(vii) Hunger strike concessions

The Secretary of State said that there were two actions arising from the hunger strike which some suggested might have contributed to the escape. The first was the wearing of civilian clothing. This had been available to prisoners in Northern Ireland well before the hunger strike. The second was cross-wing association. Additional gates had been provided when this privilege was granted, and it had not been available since October 1982 when the Loyalist segregation campaign had started. This would be a matter for the inquiry, but he had no evidence at present to suggest that policy developments arising from the resolution of the hunger strike had directly assisted the escape.

(viii) Ministerial responsibility

The Committee made clear that they were not calling for resignations until they knew where the responsibility lay. The Secretary of State said that if the inquiry showed that policy decisions reached by Ministers had increased the likelihood of an escape, he would take full responsibility and consider resignation. But it would be a different matter if Sir James' report showed that the faults lay in the operation of procedures by staff.

Follow up to the escape

Mr Maginnis said that the RUC had been incompetent in steps they took to apprehend the escapees. The RUC and the UDR, including Reservists had not been fully called up. Action around the Maze was unco-ordinated. Vehicles were not properly checked and it was possible to avoid check-points by using minor roads. The police at Keady Police Station had only manpower enough to close three of the thirteen frontier crossings in their area. The Garda closed the other ten, but could only do so for twenty-four hours. The incompetence of the RUC had been shown by

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the fact that none of their routine operations had secured any of the escapees. An inquiry was needed into the follow up by the RUC to get at the facts. And the issue had wider ramifications. Public representatives understood best the nature of crime and terrorism in their areas and how it should be dealt with. But they were not informed of the RUC's policies and could not see the Chief Constable to influence them.

Mr Campbell said he had been surprised to learn that a UDR competition at Ballykinler had continued and that no UDR personnel had been withdrawn to take part in the operations following the escape.

The Secretary of State said that he had assured himself on 25 September that the RUC had all the resources available to them which they required and that they gave full priority to the task. There were no resource or manpower restrictions. The UDR, particularly 7, 9 and 10 UDR, were used extensively, but there was no general call out of the UDR since the RUC had not requested it. Senior officers in the RUC and the Army were on duty very quickly following the escape, as were search helicopters. But he did not deny that mistakes might have been made, and pre-arranged plans carried out too rigidly. He had asked for full reports from the Chief Constable and the GOC and would be discussing these with them shortly. He could not agree, however, that an inquiry was appropriate. This was a matter on which the security forces reported to him. He was very concerned that nothing should be done to undermine the authority of or confidence in the security forces. The real security problem lay not in the actions of the Chief Constable, nor in suggestions, which he deeply resented, that Ministers did not take security sufficiently seriously, but in their failure so far to secure full minority support for the forces of law and order.

Conclusion

The Secretary of State said that the escape had been a serious setback. It had been thought that the Maze was the most secure prison in the UK. Clearly mistakes had been made. What these were would be identified when Sir James reported. He would not be producing an interim report since this would only delay the completion of his inquiry. He accepted the interest and genuine concern of the Committee. But

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rumours spread in advance of the inquiry's report only undermined confidence. He did not believe that the escape had seriously affected the long-term security of Northern Ireland. But it had affected morale, and had bolstered the IRA. It seemed likely that most of the remaining escapees were in the Republic. Rather than engage in more terrorist activity, they were more likely to seek safer havens abroad. But as long as they were in the Republic or in Northern Ireland, they would in time be caught. He noted the Committee's wish that any caught in the South should be extradited.

Concluding the meeting, the Secretary of State invited the Committee to send him in writing the points which concerned them about the follow up by the security forces to the escape. He would be prepared to discuss these further with the Committee at a subsequent meeting. He noted, however, that it would take the Committee some time to prepare such a paper.

J. M. Lyon

J M LYON
Private Secretary

11th October 1983

CC PS/SOS (B&L)
PS/Mr Scott (B&L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Sir Ewart Bell
Mr Brennan
Mr Bourn
Mr Buxton
Mr Palmer
Mr Merifield
Mr Angel
Mr Gilliland
Mr Doyne-Ditmas
Mr Edis
Mr Reeve
Mr Boys Smith
Mr Wood
Mr Jackson
Mr Kerr
Miss Simmons
Mr Ginn

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