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# The IRA's Hunger Game: Game Theory, Political Bargaining and the Management of the 1980-1981 Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland

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# The IRA's Hunger Game: Game Theory, Political Bargaining and the Management of the 1980-1981 Hunger Strikes in Northern Ireland

## **Keywords**

IRA, Northern Ireland, prisons, game theory, hunger strike, political science, ethnic conflict, Ireland, Great Britain, political bargaining, Social Sciences, Political Science, Brendan O'Leary, O'Leary, Brendan

## **Disciplines**

Political Science

The IRA's Hunger Game:  
Game Theory, Political Bargaining and the  
Management of the 1980-1981 Hunger Strikes in  
Northern Ireland

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## List of Abbreviations

DUP – Democratic Unionist Party

ECHR – European Commission on Human Rights

HMG – Her Majesty’s Government

IRA – Irish Republican Army

INLA – Irish Nationalist Liberation Army

NIO – Northern Ireland Office

OC – Officer Commanding

RTÉ – Radió Telefís Éireann

RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary

SDLP – Social Democratic Labour Party

UDA – Ulster Defense Association

UUP – Ulster Unionist Party

UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

A hunger strike is one of the ultimate acts of protest. It is violence turned inward in defiant self-immolation. To starve and leave oneself dead on your enemy's doorstep, so to speak, achieves the aim of drawing attention to a grievance or political goal, while simultaneously claiming the moral high ground. It demonstrates an unwavering dedication to a certain cause and set of convictions. To hold a belief so firmly as to endure such a slow and painful death is almost beyond understanding. However, hunger strikes have effects far beyond the bodies of those who embark upon them; they evoke emotion, polarize people, and make men into martyrs.

Over the course of the years 1980 and 1981, republican prisoners in the Maze Prison outside of Belfast in Northern Ireland launched two hunger strikes for what they regarded as restoration of their status as political prisoners. The first hunger strike was launched on October 27, 1980 and was ended on December 30 of that year, when it appeared that a compromise had been reached. When the subsequent implementation of the changes in the prison conditions revealed differences between the prisoners and the British Government in the interpretation of the deal, the prisoners decided to strike again. The second hunger strike was launched on March 1, 1981. Between the start of that strike and its conclusion on September 26, 1981, ten hunger strikers died of starvation. No compromise had been able to be reached that could break the deadlock. However, the repercussions of the strikes were felt strongly outside the prison walls. Political and civil unrest erupted in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, and brought tensions to one of the highest points of the period of conflict known as "The Troubles".

The 1980-1981 hunger strikes have often been explained as a product of culture. Some observers and scholars view the hunger strikes as being bound to the heritage and legacies of Irish history, invariably tragic. I argue, by contrast, that the strikers viewed themselves primarily as political agents. Those who embarked on the hunger strikes had a clearly defined and explicitly political objective. The same can be said of the strikers' main opponent: the British Government. Culture did undoubtedly play a background role in the preferences of the agents involved, the IRA [Provisional Irish Republican Army] wanting a united Ireland and the British wanting to preserve the Union. Yet the behavior of each of the agents involved during the crisis was determined not by ingrained or irrational cultural behaviors, but by strategic political calculations. This thesis will utilize game theory to examine political brinksmanship during the hunger strike crisis and thereby demonstrate not only that this was a primarily political, rather than cultural, event, but also that the most important legacy of the hunger strikes has been the impact on the political landscape of Northern Ireland moving forward.

### 1.1: Organization

In chapter two, I will begin my study of the 1980-1981 hunger strikes by reviewing the relevant literature on this topic, juxtaposing works of both political and cultural approaches. The first subsection will place the hunger strikes in context by examining the political versus the cultural interpretations of the Northern Ireland conflict. The second subsection will examine the scholarly and journalistic works that have been written specifically about the 1980-81 hunger strikes and will contrast the cultural and political interpretations of these events and their significance.

Chapter three will then provide an overview of my research methodology and source material. Here, I will draw heavily on the work on game theory developed by



political scientist Steven Brams to construct a theoretical framework through which the political bargaining behavior of the IRA and the British Government can be examined. Here I will also discuss my source material, as this thesis draws heavily on primary sources, including freshly released archival documents.

The following three chapters will provide a narrative of the hunger strikes that will trace and analyze the bargaining behavior of the British Government and the IRA. The narrative will use primary sources to tell the story of the hunger strikes from the prison controversy that preceded them through their bitter end. Throughout this telling of the hunger strike story, I will apply game theory and theory of moves to analyze the actions of the players in this negotiation game.

Chapter IV will look at the period leading up to the strikes. It will begin by providing an overview of the prison crisis in Northern Ireland, tracing the legal origins of and subsequent removal of “Special Category Status”. The chapter will then turn to the protest tactics used by the prisoners seeking restoration of “Special Category Status”. Finally, the chapter will compare the Northern Ireland prison regime to that in the Republic of Ireland and also place the prison situation in the context of international law.

Chapter V will examine the evidence from the first hunger strike. The chapter will begin at the declaration of the strike and establish the conflict that was laid out between the hunger strikers and the British government. Following this, the chapter will consider how successful the hunger strike as threat power tactic of the IRA, in particular how successful it was in raising the concern of outside actors such as the Republic of Ireland, the United States and the Vatican. Finally, the chapter will consider the varying accounts

of the circumstances under which the first hunger strike ended, and how this confused ending set the stage for the second hunger strike.

Chapter VI will then move to look at the second hunger strike. First it will describe the decision by the prisoners to strike again. Then it will detail the decision made by the republicans to take the prison struggle into the political realm, and the electoral success of hunger strike leader, Bobby Sands. Then it will assess the failures of mediation efforts through international actors such as Irish politicians, the European Commission on Human Rights, an emissary from the Pope, and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. The next section of this chapter will focus on the recently declassified records of secret negotiations that took place through a diplomatic channel following the deaths of the first four hunger strikers. Using game theory, I will look at the bargaining behaviors the British Government and the republican leadership exhibited during the negotiations and where the breakdown occurred that caused them to fail. Finally, this chapter will examine the conflicting opinions on why the strike continued after the secret negotiations had ended as well as the outside intervention of relatives that eventually brought them to an end.

I will conclude this thesis by assessing the outcome of the 1980-1981 hunger strikes, including the developments that took place within the political system of Northern Ireland. Next I will examine the various points of view on just which side “won” or came out on top in the case of the hunger strike conflict, the British or the IRA/Sinn Féin. Last, I will discuss the importance of defining the hunger strikes as a political event, and the implications of this study on the greater understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1: Political and Cultural Interpretations of Conflict in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland is a part of a select group of ethnic conflicts in which the two groups represent competing nationalisms vying for one piece of territory to be a part of two opposing sovereign states. The partition that occurred after the Irish Republic won independence in 1922 separated the six counties that comprise Northern Ireland from the Republic in the south, with the idea being that these areas had a majority unionist population who should be allowed to remain a part of the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> However, this was not a perfect split, since Northern Ireland still has a sizable minority of Catholic nationalists who make up around one third of the population. The largely Catholic Nationalist community identify with the Republic of Ireland, whereas the mostly Protestant Unionists retain strong constitutional links to the United Kingdom. Stefen Wolff therefore assesses the conflict as an ethno-national one, rather than sectarian.<sup>2</sup> The predominant cleavage is this incompatible sense of national belonging. John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary have also argued for this political approach to the Northern Ireland conflict. They have dubbed the Northern Ireland problem “a self-determination dispute spanning two states”, as both the UK and Ireland have constitutional claims to the land, and neither the unionist nor nationalist populations aspire for independence.<sup>3</sup> Questions over the legitimacy of each side’s claim to the six counties of Northern Ireland persist and are the source of the protracted conflict.<sup>4</sup> Although there are other elements, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Buckland, *A Short History of Northern Ireland*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981) 17

<sup>2</sup> Stefen Wolff, “Between Stability and Collapse: Internal and External Dynamics of Post-agreement Institution Building in Northern Ireland” in *From Power-sharing to Democracy: Post-Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies* ed. Sid Noel, (Toronto: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Brendan O’Duffy, *British-Irish Relations: From Violent Politics to Conflict Regulation*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007) 13-15

culture, religion, and socio-economic class involved in Northern Ireland, the driver of the violence has been political.

Political violence used by various parties to the Northern Ireland conflict and the difficulties faced by governments that wish to control this violence and imprison its perpetrators must be situated within this context. That competing nationalisms question the very legitimacy of the state creates the basis for the political violence, but some scholars disagree. One was scholar Conor Cruise O'Brien<sup>5</sup>, who has written on political violence in Ireland and around the world. He argued that it could never be considered right for minorities to resort to violence in order to influence the government to address their concerns or demands, as this undermines the majoritarian principle of the democratic system.<sup>6</sup> This argument ignored the fact that the “minorities” may be *nationalist* minorities within a current unit but seeking reunification within a state in which they would comprise the majority.<sup>7</sup> They do not consider the democratic government in which they live as legitimate, and thus do not hold themselves to its rules. In this way, violence has been used as a tool for undermining what is regarded as an illegitimate state. To ignore the underlying problem of legitimacy is to simply talk past the causation of political violence.

The strain political violence and terrorism imposed on the criminal judicial structures affected the governments that oversee them. In situations where political terrorism undermines the legitimacy of the constitutional order, it is necessary to

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<sup>5</sup> Connor Cruise O'Brien, *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence*, (London: Hutchinson, 1976) 76

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 24-25

<sup>7</sup> O'Duffy, *British-Irish Relations*, 11

recognize the political character of these violent acts.<sup>8</sup> On these grounds John E. Finn has criticized the British criminalization policy, which denied that terrorism in Northern Ireland was politically motivated and considers all violent acts to be equal. Finn points out that this is an explicit contradiction with the British legal definition of terrorism – which is “the use of violence for political ends.”<sup>9</sup> According to Stuart Hall and Phil Scranton, the framing of political violence within a discourse of crime and terrorism is because of the belief that, “People are more likely to support state action against a ‘criminal’ act than they would use the law to repress a ‘political’ cause.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, a fight against political status is powerful because it mobilizes popular approval for the authority of the state, while at the same time denying and containing a political enemy.

To understand the latest cycle of violence, it is important to understand one of the dominant organizations that carried out violent attacks during the Troubles: the Provisional IRA. In *Armed Struggle*, Richard English seeks to offer an authoritative history of the organization. He argues that the IRA is an embodiment of the tension between the nation and the state, the intersection of nationalism and violence, nationalism and socialist thought, and the power of aggressive ethno-religious identity as an instrument of historical and political change.<sup>11</sup> English examines the ideological justification for the IRA war against the British and believes that its actions and the arguments behind them can be systematically explained and analyzed.<sup>12</sup> The rise of the modern Provisional IRA arose of the perceived need to protect vulnerable Catholic

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<sup>8</sup> John E. Finn, *Constitutions in Crisis: Political Violence and the Rule of Law*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 49

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall and Phil Scranton, “Law, Class, and Control” in M. Fitzgerald, G. Heatly, and J. Pawson, *Crime and Society*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981)

<sup>11</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle* (London: Macmillan, 2003)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 338

communities in the North, and this self-image was tied to a belief that the partition of Ireland in 1922 set up an illegitimate state that denied Irish democracy.<sup>13</sup> Thus the Provisional IRA and the cause the claim to be fighting for can primarily be characterized as political.

However, some interpretations of the Northern Ireland conflict focus solely on cultural differences therefore simplistically classify the conflict as a cultural and sectarian struggle between Irish Catholics and British Protestants. Leland Lyons describes the Irish situation as a collision of cultures within an island whose small size forces them into conflict. To Lyons, these are “seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or live apart, caught inextricably in the web of their tragic history.”<sup>14</sup> Roy Foster believes that Northern Ireland is the site of aspects of militant Irish republicanism, such as Anglophobia and a romantic view of Gaelic revival, which have generated a culture of political antagonism.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, David Miller provides a cultural interpretation of Ulster Protestants that argues that they are a people with an absence of national identity, which has given them a ‘contractarian’ loyalty to the British Crown.<sup>16</sup> This lack of nationalist political identity presents a fundamental obstacle to conflict resolution as it inhibits Protestants from supporting seemingly rational solutions to the conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Other authors place the primary blame for the conflict on religion. David Rapoport maintains that religion has properties that both reduce and produce violence. Although no major religion eschews violence under all conditions, religious wars are

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* 339

<sup>14</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 177

<sup>15</sup> Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> David Miller, *Queen’s Rebels: Ulster Loyalism in Historical Perspective* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* 5

among the most intense because of divine justification and the total loyalty that religion inspires.<sup>18</sup> Richard Rose believes that “The history of the Roman Catholic Church and of various Protestant denominations illustrates the impossibility of compromise when transcendental and worldly values are in conflict.”<sup>19</sup> Yet some analysts among various disciplines believe the religious tone of the conflict in Northern Ireland to be more present on the side of Protestants, who view their primary differences with Catholics to be about religion, than of Catholics, who view their objections to Protestants as being largely political.<sup>20</sup> Some social scientists also cite religion as the force that enforces social boundaries through institutions such as religiously separated schools, which keep Northern Ireland a segmented society. According to this view, mutual ignorance and group solidarity have led to intolerance, prejudice, and eventually violence.<sup>21</sup>

Political violence has had a devastating impact at the individual level of a large part of the population. Three decades after the beginning of the Troubles, one in seven of the population in surveys reported being a victim of violence; one in five had a family member killed or injured; and one in four had been caught up in an explosion.<sup>22</sup> Bernadette Hayes and Ian McAllister argue that such heavy exposure to political violence actually increased civilian support for paramilitary activities. The popular attitudes that

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<sup>18</sup> David Rapoport, “Some General Observations on Religion and Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 3 no.3 (1991): 118-140

<sup>19</sup> Richard Rose, *Governing without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971) 401

<sup>20</sup> Buckalnd, *A Short History of Northern Ireland*, 100. See also Ken Heskin, *Northern Ireland: A Psychological Analysis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980) 47

<sup>21</sup> John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1995) 185

<sup>22</sup> Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister, “Sowing Dragon’s Teeth: Public Support for Political Violence and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland”. *Political Studies*, 49: 901–922

condone or are ambiguous about the use of violence serve to sustain further acts of political violence, within a continuous and perpetual cycle.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.2: Cultural and Political Interpretations of the Hunger Strikes of 1980-1981

The hunger strikes of 1980-1981 have unfortunately been an under studied event within academic scholarship on the Northern Ireland conflict. However, it is vital to understand the existing writings and analyses as they identify the key themes in the narrative of the strikes, explanations for the outcomes, and arguments of their significance in the Northern Ireland conflict. In reviewing the literature on the hunger strikes it is clear that there are two dominant opposing interpretations of the hunger strikes and their effects. The first focuses on the hunger strikes as a cultural phenomenon and a manifestation of Irish tradition and heritage. More recently, however, other scholars have instead focused on the political implications of the hunger strikes, in particular their role in propelling the political rise of Sinn Féin. This review of the literature on the hunger strikes will consider both approaches in order to assess the current state of the debate over these events.

The current literature makes much of the fact that hunger striking has a long history within Ireland. In pre-Christian Ireland the less powerful fasted against the powerful in order to redress a perceived injustice or recover a debt.<sup>24</sup> The responsibility to end the hunger strike was put on the shoulders of the perceived wrongdoer. If he allowed the hunger striker to die, he would be held responsible and have to pay damages to the family of the victim. After the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, hunger strikes fit along with the ethos of Catholic self-sacrifice. The suffering that comes with

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 902

<sup>24</sup> Padraig O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and Politics of Despair*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) 26



prolonged fasts could be culturally explained as being “offered up,” and allowing the victim to be united with the sufferings of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the ancient Book of Armagh, says that the patron saint of Ireland, St. Patrick, engaged in a hunger strike against God until the saint’s demands were met.<sup>26</sup>

It is this tradition of hunger striking that much of the writing about the hunger strikes of 1980-81 refers to. George Sweeney traces hunger striking within the Irish republican tradition back to the Gaelic revivals and the appeal of reverting back to ancient cultural traditions.<sup>27</sup> This harkening back to mythological tradition may also explain the legacy of hunger strikes within the tradition of Irish republicanism. In 1917, an imprisoned participant in the Easter Rising of 1916, Thomas Ashe, died after being force-fed during a hunger strike he and other republican prisoners had undertaken to demand to be treated as political prisoners or released.<sup>28</sup> Following this was the famous Terrance McSweeney, who died in Brixton prison on October 24, 1920 after 73 days on hunger strike. Modern republicans have also embarked on hunger strikes as well. As history shows, the history of hunger strikes in Ireland has produced very mixed results, with some succeeding in their aims, and some doomed to a deadly failure.

Sweeney concludes that these hunger strikes continued because Irish republicans developed a “cult of self sacrifice” based on their mythological traditions. This cult served to meet four discernable societal needs. The first was necessity; a hunger strike was a weapon for republican prisoners who lacked support, resources, and power to protest in any other way. Second, the cult demonstrated legitimacy for their professed

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* 26

<sup>26</sup> George Sweeney, "Irish hunger strikes and the cult of self-sacrifice," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28, no. 3 (1993): 10-14

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* 12

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 13

cause of Irish freedom and unity. Third, it provided role models and martyrs for subsequent generations to admire and emulate. Finally, the cult was able to “flatter its followers” by providing historical figures and a “mythological line of descent” to which modern republicans could link their actions.<sup>29</sup>

Padraig O’Malley has taken a similar cultural view of the hunger strikes. O’Malley interprets the strikes as a metaphor for the entrapment of the larger society in Northern Ireland. In *Biting at the Grave: The Irish Hunger Strikes and Politics of Despair*, he concludes that Northern Ireland is a victim-bonded society in which memories of past injustice and humiliation are firmly entrenched and have created a sense of entrapment. O’Malley deconstructs the cultural importance of hunger strikes throughout the history of Irish political movements and the cult of sacrifice that he claims made the strikes such potent propaganda material.<sup>30</sup> It is this “politics of despair” that was reflected in the failure of all the parties involved to resolve the hunger strike crisis. The strikers’ culturally enforced self-image of themselves as martyrs for an oppressed people imprisoned them mentally just as they were imprisoned physically within the Maze. However, in this interpretation, O’Malley essentially denies the hunger strikers any degree of agency, especially political agency. According to this O’Malley,

“the prisoners did what they were supposed to do. Their actions, ultimately, were not the actions of autonomous individuals, but rather a reflexive embrace of the way in which political prisoners throughout Irish history were presumed to have behaved...In the end they were the victims of our myths.”<sup>31</sup>

O’Malley further applies this pessimistic explanation of culture to the Northern Ireland conflict overall. He claims that in Ireland, all parties to the conflict are stuck in an

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 14

<sup>30</sup> O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 3

<sup>31</sup> O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 117

action-response pattern that endlessly repeats itself and inhibits the reasoning, questioning, and inventiveness needed to remake the society and emerge from the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

*Ten Men Dead* by David Beresford is the most commonly cited book written about the strikes. Beresford, a South African journalist, was Ireland correspondent for *The Guardian* during the conflict. As Beresford confesses himself in his author's note, this book is a work of extended journalism rather than of scholarship. It seeks to provide a detailed account of the hunger strikes from their beginning as an escalation of the previous prison protests to their bitter end and the political fallout that followed. He relies primarily on republican sources and he is mildly sympathetic towards them. What especially sets this account apart is the fact that Beresford had access to IRA "comms", communications often written on cigarette wrappers or toilet paper, between the prisoners and the IRA leadership and their families outside. The reprinting of these letters within the book are invaluable for understanding the internal dynamics within the IRA prison hierarchy, their relationship with the leadership on the outside, and the way that the prisoners themselves were waging their fight through the hunger strike protest. His major conclusion is that the hunger strikes were a fight over much more than political status of the prisoners; they were a showdown between the republican ideal of the struggle of the Irish people and the British Government.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the cultural explanation of the hunger strikes is shared by Aogan Mulcahy in his article "Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike." Mulcahy takes a different methodological approach

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<sup>32</sup>ibid. 287

<sup>33</sup> David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987).

to his analysis, focusing on media coverage of the strikes and comparing national and international press with local media and the cultural understandings of the public.<sup>34</sup> Mulcahy aims to use the hunger strikes as a case study to demonstrate the media's role in claims making and the process of establishing legitimacy.<sup>35</sup> He points out that major news outlets such as the *Irish Times* and the *New York Times* did not present the striker's demands for political status as legitimate. For the most part, the mainstream media within Britain, Ireland, and around the world seemed to follow the British government line that to do so would be to legitimize the political violence carried out by the strikers' organizations as an acceptable tactic. However, this seemingly negative coverage did not inhibit the strikers from gaining a certain amount of popular support. Therefore, he concludes, the media's role in the hunger strike was important but not conclusive to influence public opinion.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the explanations of culture presented above, some authors take a more political approach to explaining what happened during the hunger strikes and their significance in the history of Northern Ireland. First, they view the decision to carry out a hunger strike as a strategic political move. They also consider the most important legacy of the hunger strikes of 1980-81 to be the movement of militant republicanism into the political realm.

The research of Stephen Scanlan, Laurie Cooper Stoll, and Kimberly Lumm has shed some light on the use of hunger striking as a political tactic in this last century. The evidence shows that hunger strikes have been a widespread phenomenon, not at all

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<sup>34</sup> Aogan Mulcahy, "Claims-making and the construction of legitimacy: press coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish hunger strike", *Social Problems*, 42 no. 4 (1995): 449-67

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* 450.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 463.

exclusive or unique to the Irish culture. Hunger striking has been adapted by a wide array of individuals and organizations, fighting for a variety of causes on almost every continent.<sup>37</sup> Hunger striking as a political tactic has a particular appeal to those who feel “politically impotent” and are engaged in a power dynamic that affords them few opportunities to protest, such as within a prison system, where 69.9% of hunger strikes occur. For this reason, their research references Gene Sharp’s game theory of power, from his 1973 work, *The Politics of Non-violent Action*.<sup>38</sup> Scanlan, Stoll, and Lumm argue that hunger striking is a prime example of the “political jiu-jitsu” described by Sharp, where the opposition group is able to increase their unity and support while politically throwing the ruler off balance and weakening his/her regime.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Scanlan, Stoll, and Lumm argue that hunger strikes reveal the tactical significance that emotion plays in social movements. James Jasper argues that appeals to emotions have been slighted in research on political protest because of a naïve association they have with irrationality.<sup>40</sup> Yet, hunger strikes include both rationality and emotion, especially when those embarking on them do so with the specific intention of evoking emotions that will mobilize a social movement around the striker’s cause.

Liam Clarke’s analysis of the 1980-81 hunger strikes and their aftereffects focuses on how these events led to the movement of the IRA from the bullet to the ballot box. In *Broadening the Battlefield: The H-Blocks and the Rise of Sinn Fein*, he argues that the IRA leadership used the hunger strike crisis to move their struggle beyond the

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen J. Scanlan, Laurie Cooper Stoll, and Kimberly Lumm, “Starving for Change: The Hunger Strike and Nonviolent Action, 1906-2004”, in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 28 (2008): 275-323

<sup>38</sup> Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Non-Violent Action*, (Boston: P. Sargent Publisher, 1973)

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

military realm and adopt a strategy that became known as “the armalite and the ballot box”.<sup>41</sup> He claims that the IRA’s previous tactic of pure force and armed struggle alone had begun to fail at this point, and that the organization used the electoral success of the hunger strike and the potent ability of this crisis to mobilize support for their cause to facilitate their political rise. This switch in tactics, he claims, was vital and was a conscious tactical move by the leadership of the organization.<sup>42</sup>

The most recent addition to the literature on the hunger strikes has been F. Stuart Ross’s book *Smashing H-Block*.<sup>43</sup> This book takes a different approach to analyzing the history of the hunger strikes. Rather than focusing on the prisoners themselves or the high-level political actors involved, he instead examines the coalition of groups involved grassroots organizing in support of the prisoners and their demands. Although much attention has been given in other accounts to the rise in of Sinn Féin as a political organizing force during this period, Ross points out that there was really an umbrella of organizations, from the Relatives’ Action Committees to the Irish Republican Socialist Party to People’s Democracy, which also played key roles in garnering support and staging protests. Thus, Ross’s investigation provides important insight into how the mobilization of protesting groups both within Northern Ireland and the Republic contributed to the reshaping and revival of modern Irish republicanism.

Finally, Anthony McIntyre has critiqued the current body of literature on the hunger strikes of 1980-1981, positing that most of the current treatments of these

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<sup>41</sup> This phrase is became well known following a speech given by Danny Morrison at the Sinn Fein Ard Feis in 1983.

<sup>42</sup> Liam Clarke, *Broadening the Battlefield: The H-Blocks and the Rise of Sinn Fein*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987)

<sup>43</sup> Stewart Ross, *Smashing H-Block: The Popular Campaign against Criminalization and the Irish Hunger Strikes 1976-81*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011)

historical events do not do justice to the study of Irish republicanism or the Northern Ireland question.<sup>44</sup> A former IRA volunteer who spent fourteen years in the Long Kesh prison, four of which as a participant in the blanket/ dirty protests for political status, McIntyre is now a Northern Ireland scholar and journalist. He dismisses some of the treatments of the hunger strike, particularly Beresford, as being “superficial”. Although he concedes that Clarke is more substantive, he takes issue with the notion that Sinn Féin emerged from a vacuum, which he feels undermines the long-standing political objectives that IRA violence was meant to achieve. While he also commends the thoroughness of O’Malley’s identification of political change within republicanism, he believes that O’Malley places too high an emphasis in “some hazily defined culture of martyrdom”, rather than ideological legitimizing props. Above all McIntyre criticizes “internalist” analyses of the IRA as an organization, which he believes ignore the fundamental relationship between Irish republicanism and the British state.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design**

#### **3.1: Hypothesis and Research Design**

The aim of this study is to refute cultural interpretations of the hunger strikes and to show that they were in fact a case of political bargaining. In embarking on the hunger strike, the IRA challenged the British Government to what was, essentially, a “chicken game”; both the British Government and the IRA were engaged in bargaining activity to try to secure victory in the situation.<sup>45</sup> As such, my analysis will focus on game theory

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<sup>44</sup> Anthony McIntyre, “Modern Irish republicanism: The product of British state strategies,” *Irish Political Studies*, 10 no.1 (1995): 97-122.

<sup>45</sup> This term for the hunger strike has previously been used by John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary in *Explaining Northern Ireland*, 245-246

and the brinksmanship that was taking place between the two sides in order to explain why there was such a disastrous outcome. To be certain, the hunger strikes also involved other key actors, such as the Irish Government and the unionists in Northern Ireland. However, by focusing this study on the two players with the actual power to end the strike, we can highlight the central dynamics of the conflict and the breakdown of negotiations.

Although the word “game” is colloquially associated with lighthearted fun, there is no such association in game theory.<sup>46</sup> The formal representations of games in game theory connect the participants of a negotiation, the “players”, to social states realized from the play of the game, the “outcomes”.<sup>47</sup> This thesis will employ a specific type of game theory known as the theory of moves, pioneered by political theorist Steven Brams. Classical game theory has very little to say about the decision processes that determine the choices made by the players in the game to produce certain outcomes. However, this is a vital element to have when applying game theory to the choices made by political actors in conflict situations. Brams’ Theory of Moves adds this dimension, by assuming that players look ahead before making any moves, altering their strategies in anticipation of the possible moves of their opponent.<sup>48</sup> This allows for game theory to serve as a framework to be used by political scholars when looking at negotiation, bargaining, and brinksmanship.

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<sup>46</sup> Steven J. Brams, *Game Theory and Politics*, (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc, 2004) 2

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 3

<sup>48</sup> Steven Brams, *Theory of Moves*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)



Brams has previously applied his theory to the Northern Ireland conflict before, in his study of the negotiations that lead to the Good Friday Accords Peace Agreement in 1998.<sup>49</sup> I have adapted this model to fit the case study of the hunger strikes.

When presented with a conflict such as the prison hunger strikes there are two options for each side. One could either take a hard-line stance (denoted by H) or a conciliatory stance (denoted by C). For the British Government a hard line stance would be the refusal to grant any of the five demands and to hold firm on the principle of no political status. A conciliatory stance for the British Government would be to negotiate some type of compromise solution to address the grievances of the prisoners and possibly give some type of special status. The opposite would be true for the IRA; a hard line stance would be to hold out and continue the hunger strike unless the five demands were met, whereas a conciliatory stance would be willingness to compromise on the demands.

When applied to a standard 2 x 2 matrix within game theory, we see that the choice of C or H by each side leads to four possible outcomes. Each of these outcomes is then assigned a numerical value between 1 and 4 based on how great the payoff would be for each player. The higher the number is, the greater the payoff would be for that player.

1. C-C: Both states take a conciliatory stance and reach a state of mutual compromise. This is the next-best state for each player. The main benefit for both players is an end to the hunger strike and an avoidance of further deaths. The prisoners would gain improved prison conditions and the British Government would gain from a more sustainable prison regime and the loss of a key IRA propaganda tool.

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<sup>49</sup> Steven Brams and Jeffrey Togman, "Agreement through Threats: the Northern Ireland Case" in Joseph Leggold *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 328

2. H-H: Deadlock and the continuation of the hunger strike and loss of life. This is the next worst state for the British Government. Although it is able to demonstrate strength by refusing to negotiate, the hunger strikes continue. The British Government would also have to accept further isolating the Catholic minority within Northern Ireland and facing international pressure to bring a solution to the conflict. This is the worst state for the IRA; in addition to the continuation of the current prison regime, they also continue to suffer deaths from the hunger strikes.
3. H (IRA) – C (Great Britain): Capitulation by the British Government; the IRA wins its five demands and the restoration of special category status. This is the worst state for the British Government, which would be seen both at home and abroad as caving into terrorism. It would greatly anger the Protestant unionist community in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it would set a precedent that could further encourage the IRA to try to force concessions from the British under duress. This is the best state for the IRA, which would gain restoration of the five demands without having to compromise and enjoy increased popular legitimacy.
4. C (IRA) – H (British Government): Capitulation by the IRA; they call off the hunger strike and Britain wins. This is the best state for the British Government. It does not have to make any concessions to the IRA and is able to maintain a public image of strength in the face of a threat. This is the next worst state for the IRA. While it fails to achieve its objective and the current prison regime stays in place, it is considered a better state than continued hunger strike as the organization no longer has to endure loss of life.

**Table 1**

The IRA/Sinn Fein	The British Government	
	C-C (3,3) - Compromise	C-H (2, 4) – Capitulation by the IRA
	H-C (4,1) – Capitulation by the British Government	H-H (1, 2) - Conflict

**Key:**

C= Conciliatory stance, H= Hard line stance  
 1 = Worst, 2 = Next Worst, 3= Next Best, 4 =Best

In a game where both players have all the information, the IRA could assume that Britain would consistently choose H. For the British Government, H is advantageous regardless of whatever strategy the IRA chooses, thus making it the “dominant strategy”.<sup>50</sup> The IRA is then faced with a choice of which strategy it will choose. Unlike the British Government, the IRA does not have a dominant strategy: H is better if the British choose C, as it would yield an outcome of (4,1) rather than (3,3). However, if the British choose H, the IRA is better off choosing C, which would give it an outcome of (2,4) rather than (1,2).

In a game where all the players have complete information, the IRA could assume that the British Government will consistently choose its dominant strategy of H. In that case the best move for the IRA would be to choose C, which would put it in a slightly better position, (2,4) than if it were to choose H and reach conflict, which would put it in the worst state of (1,2). The strategies that produce the state of (2,4) constitute what game theorists call a Nash equilibrium.<sup>51</sup> Were either player to unilaterally depart from the

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<sup>50</sup> Brams and Togman, “Agreement through Threats: the Northern Ireland Case”, 331

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 331

strategy associated with the state of (2,4), it would do worse. The state of (2,4), in which the IRA capitulates and the British Government holds a hard line, is the unique stable game. Were each side to take a conciliatory stance and reach a compromise at (3,3) each would have an incentive to depart from C to try to achieve its best state. The other two states, in which Great Britain capitulates or in which the parties engage in conflict are unstable in that at least one player would have the incentive to unilaterally change its strategy.<sup>52</sup>

The predictions of classical game theory reason that any hard line stance or use of violence by the IRA would seem irrational.<sup>53</sup> However, the historical record of the Northern Ireland conflict shows that the reality of this situation does not match with the predictions of classical theory. In order to understand the behavior of the IRA in its clash with the British Government Brams's Theory of Moves must be used. The major element of Theory of Moves is the notion of threat power, which is the ability to better endure an inefficient state than an opponent.<sup>54</sup> An inefficient state is one that is worse for both players than another state in the game. When looking at the Northern Ireland conflict, we see that throughout "the Troubles" both the IRA and the British Government have attempted to assert their threat power. The IRA used violence and conflict to establish that it would be willing to endure a mutually harmful state (1,2). In doing so, it gave Britain a choice between its two worst states (4,1) and (1,2). Given these options, game theory predicts that the British Government would maintain position H rather than compromise or concede the demands of the IRA.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 330

<sup>53</sup> Brams and Togman, "Agreement through Threats: the Northern Ireland Case" 331

<sup>54</sup> Brams, *Theory of Moves*, 121

<sup>55</sup> Brams and Togman, "Agreement through Threats: the Northern Ireland Case" 331

I hypothesize that the IRA took a hard line stance in the negotiations during the hunger strike not because it preferred the loss of life of the hunger strikers to the state of a compromise, but as an assertion of threat power. It opted for hunger strike action originally because it hoped to force the British Government to take a conciliatory stance. From the outset, the prisoners knew that hunger strikes had the potential to touch an emotional nerve that, if channeled with tact, could put both internal and external pressure on the British Government. They believed that by raising the stakes of their protest they would garner sufficient threat power to move the British to concede their demands. Furthermore, the hunger strikes continued because the opportunity costs for the IRA changed. As the hunger strikes began to prove more and more useful as a means with which to win elections, new members, and popular support, the IRA had less to be gained by taking a conciliatory stance, and indeed to do so would risk disgracing the memory of those strikers who had already died. This is the reason that the strikes became prolonged rather than an irrational cultural impulse. In the political struggle both the IRA and the British Government had become so entrenched in their hard line positions that neither felt as though they could move without putting their opponent in an advantageous position.

### 3.2: Source Materials

My inquiry into the hunger strikes will take advantage of primary source documents accessed from the British National Archives in London, the Irish National Archives in Dublin, and the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in Belfast. These documents include diplomatic cables from each country's embassy, as well as memos from the Foreign Commonwealth Office and the Office of Home Affairs, and cabinet papers. Government sources also available include transcripts of speeches made by British and Irish politicians both to the public and within the Westminster

Parliament and the Irish Dáil (Parliament) at the time. Finally, the archival documents consulted also include transcripts of television and radio interviews, as well as newspaper articles from Britain, Ireland, and around the globe. These media sources add another dimension necessary to understanding the hunger strikes as an event that carried an incredible amount of emotional weight and propaganda potential. Due to the 30-year hold on documents, these sources were only released in 2011. As such, no archives-based investigation of these events has been executed and, until now, no scholar was fully able to cross check claims made by journalists with the government record. The access to these records makes this study an exciting opportunity to add to scholarship on this topic.

However, these archival sources do have their limitations. Several files held by the British National Archives and the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland are currently not available to the public. These files have been placed on eighty to hundred year holds, rather than the traditional thirty, for security reasons because they pertain to negotiations with a group that is considered to be a terrorist organization. In addition, at the time the author traveled to the United Kingdom and Ireland to carry out this research, June 2011, some of the documents pertaining to the second hunger strike in 1981 had not been released. The most recent document release on December 30, 2011 made some, but not all, of the files from 1981 available to the public electronically. It is important to acknowledge the limits of these archival materials within my analysis. Accessing these documents is a monumental step forward in piecing together a thorough narrative of the strikes as a historic event. However, there are pieces of evidence that are not yet available which would enable me to confidently call this analysis a totally complete account.

The limitations of my archival material have led me to seek out other sources as important supplemental material. In addition to archival documents, this thesis draws upon firsthand accounts of the hunger strikes by prisoners and major political figures from Britain, Ireland, and Northern Ireland. It will use statements made in memoirs of figures such as former hunger strikers, IRA leaders, and major political figures from both Britain and Ireland. In addition to these memoirs, I utilize video recorded interviews with former prisoners and IRA members directly involved with the hunger strikes, as well as British and Irish politicians. By employing these types of source materials in addition to my archival findings, I have designed my methodology to place a heavy emphasis on the use of firsthand accounts and primary sources. An obvious issue to consider when using these sources in such a polarizing subject, however, is the question of bias and point of view. By taking into account the position of each author, especially their political background, I will be able to address this issue to draw and support my conclusions.

## **Chapter 4: The Looming Crisis**

### **4.1: The Legal Starting Point**

The story of the 1980-81 hunger strikes must begin by tracing the evolution of the legal frameworks the British employed that made the prison system such a potent battleground for the political crisis. Internment without trial for those suspected of involvement with paramilitary groups is the appropriate starting point. Previously used in the history of Northern Ireland against republicans, it was reintroduced on 9 August 1971 and lasted until 5 December 1975. During this period a total of 1981 people were detained. Of these the vast majority, 1874, were Catholics suspected of belonging to

republican groups, whereas only 107 were Protestant and loyalist.<sup>56</sup> The unbalanced nature of internment was not an accident or a product of circumstance, as previously thought. Rather, it was a decision made by the British Government because of their fear that interning Protestant loyalists would destabilize the unionist government.<sup>57</sup> The security reasoning behind such drastic measures was straightforward; by interning as many potential paramilitary members as possible, law enforcement and security forces could better control the situation. However, the legacy of internment drives, such as Operation Demetrius, set into motion in 1971, proved to have the opposite of this intended effect.

Within a growing section of the Catholic community, to be interned in Long Kesh became increasingly seen as a badge of respect and even honor. The fact that many of those interned had committed no offense against the government reinforced one of the major arguments of the IRA: that the British Government in Westminster and the Unionist government at Stormont were out to oppress Northern Ireland's Catholic minority, and that Northern Ireland was "unreformable." Internment is a recurring theme in interviews with IRA members, when asked what their motivations were for joining the armed struggle. Many had family members that were interned or were interned themselves before becoming an actual member of the organization.<sup>58</sup>

The following year, 1972, included two major legal events that would have repercussions on the prison system. The first was the *Northern Ireland (Temporary*

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<sup>56</sup> Martin Melaugh, "Internment - Summary of Main Events", Conflict Archive on the Internet, University of Ulster, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/intern/sum.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Heath, "Draft Letter to Lynch, 8 August 1971", 15/478/8 National Archives, Kew. The original statement re-assuring the Irish that internment would be a balanced policy against paramilitaries is struck through.

<sup>58</sup> Robert W. White, "From Peaceful Protest to Guerrilla War — Micromobilization of the Provisional Irish Republican Army." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 no. 6 (1989): 1277-1302. & Robert W. White, *Provisional Irish Republicans: An Oral and Interpretive History*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993)



*Provisions) Act 1972*. Under this act, direct rule was imposed over Northern Ireland, meaning that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland took over the duties of Northern Ireland's Governor, ministers, and government departments. Westminster Parliament and the British Government could make law for Northern Ireland through "Orders in Council."<sup>59</sup> The first of these was the *Detention of Terrorists Order*, which slightly modified the policy of internment. Under the new order, suspects were held under an interim custody order approved by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State. That same year, the Commission on Legal Procedures to Deal with Terrorist Activities in Northern Ireland, chaired by Lord Diplock, published its *Report of the Commission to consider legal procedures to deal with terrorist activities in Northern Ireland*. The report argued that the main obstacle to dealing effectively with terrorist crime in the regular courts of justice was intimidation of witnesses.<sup>60</sup> This problem, it concluded, could not be overcome by changes in the conduct of the trial, and until it could be removed the use of extra-judicial processes by the Executive for the detention of terrorists could not be dispensed with. It recommended significant changes to the judicial system when dealing with terrorist activities, which it termed "scheduled offenses."<sup>61</sup>

Major change to the prison system in Northern Ireland came with the *Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1973*. The Act banned membership in the Irish Republican Army, four other militant republican organizations, as well as the Ulster Volunteer Force under penalty of law. This act implemented the findings of the Diplock report and created "Diplock Courts" in which terrorist offences were tried. Diplock courts

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<sup>59</sup> *Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act 1972*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1972) online <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hms0/tpa1972.htm> accessed January 15, 2012

<sup>60</sup> *Report to Consider Legal Procedure to Deal with Terrorist Activities in Northern Ireland* (Diplock Report) (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1972) paragraphs 12-20

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

had a single judge and no jury, yet had all the powers of a regular court. They became infamous because they were a radical departure from Anglo-Saxon legal tradition. The 1973 Act also provided expanded powers for law enforcement when dealing with suspected terrorists. A constable was given the power to arrest without warrant any person whom he suspected of being a terrorist.<sup>62</sup> Constables were also given unlimited powers of search and seizure in regards to the premises of such suspects.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, these powers were not only given to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), but also to the British Army, thus creating an even more militarized security regime that served to further isolate the Catholic minority.<sup>64</sup>

In February 1974 the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees, resolved to restore “the full responsibility of law and order to the police.”<sup>65</sup> That year parliament enacted the *Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act* of 1974.<sup>66</sup> This act gave emergency powers to police forces in Northern Ireland where they suspected terrorism in order to crack down on the activities of paramilitary groups. The first major effect of this act was to make membership in or association with a proscribed organization a crime. This included belonging an organization, financially supporting an organization, arranging or assisting in a meeting of three or more persons in support of such an organization or wearing an item or displaying any article as to “arouse reasonable apprehension that he is a member or supporter of a proscribed organization.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act* 1973, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1973/53/contents/enacted>, 10:1

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* 11

<sup>64</sup> English, *Armed Struggle*, 140

<sup>65</sup> Merlyn Rees, *Northern Ireland: a Personal Perspective*, (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1985) 93

<sup>66</sup> *Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act*, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1974, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmso/pta1974.htm>

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

Constables were given the authority to arrest without warrant a person whom they reasonably suspected to be guilty of such an offence. Finally, the report was significant in its definition of the term “terrorism” as “the use of violence for political ends.”<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.2: Special Category Status

In the early days direct rule a special status for politically motivated prisoners was introduced into the prison system. Conservative Secretary of State William Whitelaw introduced Special Category Status in June 1972. This event provides an important historical precedent into the bargaining power of republican hunger strikes. Whitelaw approved of Special Category partially under pressure from a hunger strike staged by prisoners at the Crumlin Road Jail in Belfast, but also because of political developments taking place at the time that included the possibility of persuading the IRA to agree to a ceasefire. Here, Whitelaw was presented with a similar predicament to that which the British Government would face in 1980-81. Whitelaw decided to opt for what the game theory matrix claims is the worst possible state for the British Government, one in which the IRA takes a hard line and the government capitulates. Though he was later widely criticized for the decision, Whitelaw argued that the short-term gain to be made by appeasing the IRA and addressing grievances of the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) outweighed the potential long-term dangers of giving legitimacy to the republican movement and caving in to the pressure of a hunger strike.<sup>69</sup> Thus, it can be seen that it was political considerations, calculated by weighing the potential gains to be made by this concession against the consequences of standing firm, which brought Special Category into being in the first place. Although in the isolated manner of prison

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (London: Aurum Press Ltd, 1989) 94

policy he opted for state of capitulation, he framed the prison situation within the larger context of bringing about a solution to the Northern Ireland conflict. Were he able to get the IRA to maintain a ceasefire, which he had high hopes for at the time, then the British Government could better be described as inhabiting a compromise state, (3,3), since the government would have compromised on the prisons in order to get the IRA to compromise on its use of violence.

Special Category distinguished between “ordinary decent criminals” and those who were imprisoned serving sentences that were directly the result of the disturbed political situation, such as members of the IRA. The procedure for recognition under Special Category was purely administrative. Prisoners would apply to the Governor for Special Category. The Governor would then seek confirmation from the security forces as to whether the prisoner was associated with the organization of which he claimed to be a member. According to British Government documentation, refusal of applications was relatively rare, as prisoners would not often apply unless they were confident of being accepted by the members of the paramilitary group in prison.<sup>70</sup>

Special Category Status comprised three major elements.<sup>71</sup> The first was exemption from the requirement of prison work. The second was the right for the prisoners to wear their own clothes. The third was weekly letters and visits with parcels which could include food and tobacco. Furthermore, special category prisoners were not held in traditional prison cells. Rather, they were housed in compounds that became known among the prisoners as “cages.”<sup>72</sup> This housing arrangement posed difficulties for prison authorities that may have sought to apply normal measures of a prison regime.

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<sup>70</sup> Northern Ireland Office, “Presentation on Prisons 10 March, 1976”, PRONI PCC 1/5/7, Belfast. 3

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 17.

About 80 prisoners lived together in a compound, and they were run and organized according to paramilitary structures. For example, in the case of the IRA, this meant that each compound had a hierarchy under the OC (Officer Commanding).<sup>73</sup>

From the time Special Category was introduced in 1972 to when it was abolished in 1976, the population of special category prisoners in Northern Ireland grew rapidly, both in absolute number and as a proportion of the total population of convicted prisoners. At the beginning of 1973 there were 379 special category prisoners, about 42% of the total population of convicted prisoners in the province.<sup>74</sup> As of March 1976 there were 1498 special category prisoners, about 68% of the population. Of these prisoners, a large proportion was in prison for serious offences. 226 prisoners – about 15% - were sentenced for murder or violence against the person. 834 prisoners – 56% – were in prison for firearms or explosives offences.<sup>75</sup>

Special Category Status came under attack with the publication of the *Report of a Committee to consider, in the context of civil liberties and human rights, measures to deal with terrorism in Northern Ireland*, which became known as the Gardiner Report after the Committee's chairman. Chapter 5 of the report made clear that the Committee thought that the decision to grant Special Category Status had been a mistake. Paramilitary groups held within the compound accommodations were able to organize themselves according to their own hierarchical structures and had therefore caused the prison authorities to lose all meaningful control over the prisoners.<sup>76</sup> According to a

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<sup>73</sup> McKeown, *Out of Time*, 37-39.

<sup>74</sup> Northern Ireland Office, "Presentation on Prisons 10 March, 1976", PCC 1/5/7, PRONI, Belfast, 3

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Report of a Committee to consider, in the context of civil liberties and human rights, measures to deal with terrorism in Northern Ireland, January 1975 (Gardiner Report)*. (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1975)

British Government background paper on Special Category, “Inevitably the compounds have thrown up their own leaders, who may in some cases exert considerable power and influence over the men in the compounds.”<sup>77</sup> However, it was not only concern for the internal security situation within the prison that worried the British Government; it was also the effect that Special Category Status was believed to have on the attitudes among the population of Northern Ireland as a whole. “Special category is in effect a declaration of continued allegiance to paramilitary groups which organize or condone violent crime. Community attitudes to crime and to prison are blurred when offenders can be represented as loyalist or republican prisoners of war. Special Category is regarded as a badge of respectability particularly amongst young prisoners.”<sup>78</sup> Thus the British Government concluded that it was at a losing state in the conflict game with the IRA. Special Category Status had not been a successful means of appeasing the IRA into a cease-fire agreement. Therefore the British Government had no gains from the decision; it concluded that it had only lost both in terms of its control over the prison regime and in the acceptance of paramilitary activity among the Catholic minority. The report recommended that, “The earliest practicable opportunity should be taken to bring special category status to an end.”<sup>79</sup>



**Figure 1**

The report went further with this recommendation, going on to say that the government should immediately begin to plan for construction of both a new prison for

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<sup>77</sup> Northern Ireland Office, “Presentation on Prisons 10 March, 1976”, PCC 1/5/7, PRONI, Belfast, 3

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* 1

detainees and a temporary prison to be used while a permanent structure was being built. These new prisons were recommended to have designs modified to improve internal security, and also be significantly reduced in size. “The first crucial requirement is for cells.”<sup>80</sup> In order to do away with Special Category Status and create a prison that fell within the lines of a normal UK prison structure, the British Government had to do away with the compound living arrangements reminiscent of POW camps and build cellular accommodations more appropriate for criminals.<sup>81</sup>

The decision to take away special category status was taken by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees. According to Rees, the issue of special category status had been on the agenda since he took office and all that had prevented him from doing away with it earlier had been the fact that suitable prison accommodation needed to be built.<sup>82</sup> With the H-Block prisons were newly completed, Rees ended special category status for those sentenced for crimes committed after March 1, 1976. He claimed that he might have gone even further and ended it for those already sentenced, but both the lack of prison cells and the legal difficulties of removing concessions from existing prisoners ruled out this possibility.<sup>83</sup>

#### 4.3: Prison Protests

The decision to take away Special Category Status began a new conflict game between the British Government and the IRA prisoners. After the withdrawal of Special Category on March 1, 1976, the first republican prisoner to protest was Kieran Nugent. He was the first offender to be brought in after the March 1 withdrawal date to refuse to

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* 3

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.* 4

<sup>82</sup> Rees, *Northern Ireland: A Personal Perspective*, 275

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 276

wear a prison uniform. He was sent naked to his cell with only a blanket to wrap around him. This began the first protest by the prisoners in the Maze, known as the “blanket protest”. The “blanket men” as they were called, all followed Nugent’s lead and refused to wear a prison uniform or do prison work. The number of prisoners “on the blanket” skyrocketed. However, this protest did not draw enough attention to make any difference in prison policy. The British Government remained steadfast in their implementation of the criminalization policies.

Over time the prisoners escalated their protest further. They refused to “slop out” (empty their chamber pots) and clean their cells. They smeared their excrement on the walls and poured their urine through the cracks in the doors.<sup>84</sup> The prisoners also smashed much of the furniture in their cells as well as the windows, leading to the removal of all the furniture from the cells except for a mattress and chamber pot. A constant battle took place between the prisoners and the prison officers. The prison staff



Figure 2

would steam clean the cells to remove the excrement from the walls, using chemicals that the prisoners claimed made them violently sick and forced them to smash their windows to get fresh air. Forced washes were sometimes carried out, and allegations of brutality on the part of the guards were made. As of 1979 there were over 350 republican prisoners

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<sup>84</sup> Mason, Roy MP. “Letter to Michael O’Kennedy, Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, 16 October, 1978”, 6112/10/78, National Archives, Kew



convicted of offences committed after 1 March 1976 that were refusing to work, wear prison clothes, take exercise, use the toilets, or clean their cells.<sup>85</sup> The appalling state of the conditions in the Maze Prison soon began to draw limited but notable attention in the media and among the public. After visiting the H-Blocks, the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all-Ireland, Cardinal Ó’Fiaich, released a statement in which he condemned the inhuman conditions he saw there. “One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being. The nearest approach to it that I have seen was the spectacle of hundreds of homeless people living in sewer-pipes in the slums of Calcutta.”<sup>86</sup>

However, the early assessment among British public officials was that the H-Block situation, while embarrassing, did not pose a major threat. The Anti H-Block Committees that had been set up, and the activist activities they were pursuing, were not gaining the momentum the participants desired. According to a British Embassy document, although it was difficult to assess the impact of the H-block campaign, it appeared to have “failed to get off the ground” because it was “not possible to run a ‘civil rights’ campaign in parallel with a continuing campaign of violence.”<sup>87</sup> As the British were monitoring the progress of the prison protests, one of the barometers they were keeping track of was the perceived effect that the protests were having on public opinion in the South. In the late 1970s, this appeared to be extremely limited. The propaganda of the “Anti H-Block” campaign had not gained serious traction among large numbers of

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<sup>85</sup> Northern Ireland Office, “H-Blocks Background Note”, NIO/12/138, PRONI, Belfast.

<sup>86</sup> Ó’Fiaich, Tomás, “Statement by Archbishop of Armagh, Dr Tomas O’Fiaich concerning his visit on Sunday last to H-Block at Long Kesh prison, Northern Ireland, 1 August, 1978”, NIO/12/67, PRONI, Belfast.

<sup>87</sup> Gouldon, PJ. “Letter to AL Free-Gore Republic of Ireland Department FCO, British Embassy Dublin, 12 December 1978”, 7601/10/78, National Archives, Kew.

people in the Republic. “At the most, a ground-swell has been created among republican and extreme left wing organizations and among a minority of concerned clerics and civil rights campaigners.”<sup>88</sup> As was noted, some trade unions and respected members of the Catholic clergy had expressed concern about the prisoners’ conditions. However, there was still a “very wide gap between *An Phoblacht* [the Republican newspaper] obsessive interest in this campaign and the apparent indifference of the daily press”.<sup>89</sup> The British perceived themselves as having the upper hand.

#### 4.4: Comparison with the Prison Regime in the Irish Republic

The Northern Ireland authorities were not the only ones who had to deal with questions surrounding the imprisonment of members of violent organizations. The approach to handling paramilitary prisoners and prison protests in the Republic of Ireland provides an interesting comparison to the tactics used in Northern Ireland. The IRA and other paramilitary groups were also outlawed in the South and posed a security risk to the government there. Although many in the South agreed with the ultimate political goal of the IRA, the reunification of Ireland, they condemned the campaign of violence known as the “armed struggle”. The IRA, after all, also did not recognize the legitimacy of the government in Dublin, regarding it as an illegitimate state constructed after the Irish plenipotentiaries signed the Treaty of 1921, an action that was endorsed by the Irish Cabinet and Parliament, and which accepted the likelihood of both a non-republican form of government and partition.<sup>90</sup>

Acts of violence had taken place in the South as well. Notably the Queen’s cousin, Lord Mountbatten, was killed in an explosion while on holiday in Sligo in 1975.

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> English, *Armed Struggle*, 31-39.

In the Republic, the IRA was also an illegal organization, and IRA members were imprisoned for terrorist offenses. However, the handling of paramilitary prisoners differed noticeably between the North and the South. In December 1975 an official from the Northern Ireland Office visited the Department of Justice in Dublin. According to the British, the conclusion of this 1975 visit was that the prison regime in the Republic was much tougher than in the North, and it was felt that “there was an underlying suggestion that our ‘soft’ attitudes occasionally embarrassed the Prison Service in the Republic in that it led to invidious comparisons.”<sup>91</sup> This was especially the case in Portlaoise prison, where politically motivated or “subversive” prisoners were held. In 1973, the Irish Government made the decision to move all “subversive” or “politically motivated” prisoners to the Portlaoise.

The prisons in the Republic had also seen their own protests at the “toughness” of conditions, coming up against very similar choices as the British would later face under the hunger strikes. Some 20 prisoners in Portlaoise had staged their own hunger strike in March 1977 in protest at the conditions. The Irish Government had maintained what the British described as a “hard attitude” and had offered no concessions. The hunger strike was brought to an end by the intervention of the auxiliary Bishop of Dublin. The Irish Government, however, embarked on a prison reform that allowed them to appear compassionate but simultaneously show that they would not compromise with paramilitaries.<sup>92</sup> Put into game theory terms, the Irish Government had found a way to maintain the appearance of a hard-line attitude while actually moving towards a more

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<sup>91</sup> Goulden, P.J. “Prison Procedures in the Republic, 1980”, National Archives, Kew

<sup>92</sup> N.B. Department of Justice Annual Report on Prisons. (1977) Dublin, 50-51.

conciliatory state that would ameliorate the grievances of the prisoners and make future confrontations less likely.

Despite its perceived and described toughness, the prisoners in Portlaoise did enjoy the privileges (as the government and prison authorities put it) or rights (as the prisoners and their supporters put it) that were later contained in the “Five Demands” of the Maze Prison hunger strikers.<sup>93</sup> The idea of prison work, however, was not required in the Republic. Keeping the cells clean traditionally passed for work, and the prisoners were allowed to pursue educational pursuits. Furthermore, every prisoner in the Republic was entitled to wear his own clothes, irrespective of the nature of the crime for which he was convicted. The only restrictions involved general guidelines on cleanliness and quality, and there was also an embargo on any clothing in “military mode” (berets, green or blue jackets, anoraks, etc). The conclusion drawn by the British officials was that this regime “sounds like a very Irish solution to the question of prison clothing.”<sup>94</sup>

However, these British officials also remembered that the Irish prison system was quite different from that in the United Kingdom. They interpreted the prisoners in Portlaoise as enjoying “a form of political status, partly owing to the fact that they are grouped on landings according to their affiliation.”<sup>95</sup> The separation of the republican prisoners in Portlaoise from other criminals and the special security measures taken in this particular prison drew a distinction between themselves and common criminals. Security at Portlaoise was undertaken by not only the prison guards, but also by the Garda Síochána na hÉireann (“The Civic Guards of Ireland,” the Irish police) and the Army. This unique arrangement meant that there was essentially *de facto* recognition of

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<sup>93</sup> See page 53 of this thesis for more detail.

<sup>94</sup> Goulden, “Prison Procedures in the Republic”

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

the political nature of their offences and their on-going political nature by the permanent army presence at Portlaoise. Lastly, the differences in regards to the question of amnesty made the assertion of political status more important for prisoners in the North than in the South. A British official reported to ministers that the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), Jack Lynch, had implied in a television interview on January 8, 1978 that paramilitaries would receive amnesty when their organization's campaign came to an end. This meant that it was less symbolically important for them to have political status.<sup>96</sup>

#### 4.5: Special Category Prisoners and International Human Rights

The British Government was very cognizant of the fact that their participation in international bodies meant that their prison policy was subject to certain regulations under conventions of international law. In addition to providing criticism of the prison regime, the Gardiner Report had offered a brief assessment of the British anti-terrorism law in terms of civil liberties and international human rights. The major international law that it used as a standard was *The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1950*, which the United Kingdom ratified in 1951, but had not incorporated into its domestic law.<sup>97</sup> According to the Gardiner Report, Article 5 of the convention establishes the general right of liberty and security of persons; but Article 17 specifically negates the right "to engage in any activity or perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein."<sup>98</sup> Article 15 then gives any High Contracting Party the right to derogate from its obligations under

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<sup>96</sup> Goulden, PJ. "Letter to Ian McCrory Esq, Republic of Ireland Dept. FCO, 'Prison Procedures in the Republic', 1 November 1978", 6662/10/78, National Archives, Kew

<sup>97</sup> Yvonne Cripps, "Some Effects of European Law on English Administrative Law," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*: 2 no. 1 (1994) Available at: <http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol2/iss1/14>  
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<sup>98</sup> *Gardiner Report*

Article 5 “in time of war or any other public emergency to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation.”<sup>99</sup> Because of terrorism in Northern Ireland, of which the United Kingdom had given notice, the Gardiner commission concluded that the 1973 Act was not in breach of international agreement.<sup>100</sup> This reasoning raised the question of the proportionality of the response of the British authorities.

The European Commission on Human Rights (ECHR) was an institution, however, available to the protesting prisoners to try to secure restoration of special category status. The ECHR was established as part of the machinery under the European Convention of Human Rights. Its mandate was to investigate alleged breaches by States party to the Convention. The UK had accepted the optional protocol, which allows individuals, as well as other governments, to make applications under the Convention. The Commission’s task was decide whether applications are admissible, and then to consider their “merits.” The Commission is mandated to try to achieve a “friendly settlement.” It then prepares a report for the Committee of Ministers, which finally may be referred to the European Court of Human Rights.

Four of the protesting prisoners, including the initiator of the protest, Kieran Nugent, made an application to the European Commission on Human Rights (ECHR). While some of their complaints related to the normal prison regime, most of their significant grievances were directly related to the ‘dirty protest,’ alleging that the appalling conditions were the result of government policy. They claimed that their right to freedom of conscience and belief, as guaranteed to them under Article 9 of the convention had been denied, because the prison authorities sought to subject them to the

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

normal prison regime. They further argued that the regime under which they lived amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment, thus violating Article 3 of the convention.<sup>101</sup> The prisoners hoped to utilize international law and human rights norms as an instrument of threat power to force the British Government into more conciliatory stance.

In June 1980 the ECHR was released a partial decision that declared the bulk of the application inadmissible.<sup>102</sup> The Commission found that the right to preferential treatment or status for a certain category of prisoners was not among those guaranteed by the Convention. Furthermore, the protesting prisoners in the Maze did not qualify for the status of political prisoner under existing norms of international law, such as the Geneva Conventions.<sup>103</sup> The complaints of degrading conditions under Article 3 were all also declared inadmissible. The ECHR sided entirely with the British government on this matter, ruling that the prisoners had refused to avail themselves of the prison facilities, and the unhygienic living conditions were self-imposed as part of their protest for special category status and could be eliminated almost immediately were the prisoners to abandon their protest.<sup>104</sup>

Despite these effective counter arguments against the prisoners, the British Government was internally worried about the prospect of being criticized internationally for human rights violations. In an internal document from the Northern Ireland Office at Stormont, the government recognized that the policies for which they were most

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<sup>101</sup> Council of Europe, "Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms," (1950) <http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Word/005.doc>

<sup>102</sup> Northern Ireland Office, "European Commission of Human Rights Partial Decision on the Application by 4 Republican Protesters at Maze, June 1980", PRONI, Belfast

<sup>103</sup> Marshall, JA, "European Commission on Human Rights: The Maze Case, June 1980", NIO/12/184, PRONI, Belfast

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

vulnerable at Strasbourg would be the continuing nature of the punishment and the complete denial of all privileges. Under the agreement, collective punishment was specifically banned by the standard minimum rules. Fear of international criticism and concern for the government's image shaped government actions taken around the prison protests. The government recognized that humanitarian concern could turn into political pressure, especially if it emerged that they would be vulnerable at the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>105</sup> However, this concern at most changed how the government presented itself. It had little to no effect on the actual conditions for the prisoners. The Governor of the prison was rigid on the question of punishment and gave no credence to the "humanitarian" viewpoint. He felt that this could be countered successfully by emphasizing that the prisoner's conditions were self-inflicted, and that there were defensible security reasons behind practices such as intimate body searches, such as the frequent attempts to smuggle contraband into the prison.<sup>106</sup>

The international human rights organization Amnesty International was soon drawn into the controversy. It acknowledged the Government's point that many of the conditions in which the prisoners were living were self-inflicted and related to their claims for special category status. As such, Amnesty International was not inclined or able to help, because it did not support a special status for any prisoners, be they prisoners of conscience or otherwise.<sup>107</sup> However, it did express a wish to the British Government that it would demonstrate flexibility and humanitarian restraint in the matter. It noted that the combined punishment and disciplinary measures imposed on the prisoners, in some cases for the extended period of over a year, appeared to exceed the

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<sup>105</sup> Hannigan, JE "Protesters in the H Blocks, 20 October 1978", DUS/20/0301, National Archives, Kew

<sup>106</sup> Huckle, AE "Visit to HM Prison Maze, 31 October, 1978), 3B/10475/MR, National Archives, Kew

<sup>107</sup> Oosting, Dick. "Letter to Roy Mason, 24 August, 1978", 5185/10/78, National Archives, Kew



maximum penalties for any offence under prison rules.<sup>108</sup> It also pointed to evidence that suggests that the social isolation of the cellular confinement, coupled with the deprivation of mental and physical stimulation, was detrimental to the mental and physical health of the prisoners. It was Amnesty's view that these, therefore, were minimum requirements and not privileges dependent on good behavior.<sup>109</sup> Amnesty countered the Government's point about the seriousness of the crimes of which the prisoners were convicted by saying that the seriousness of the crime did not reduce the obligation of the government to ensure maximum effort for humane treatment. It concluded the letter by urging the government to make the first step towards ameliorating these conditions by ensuring that the prisoners received adequate exercise and occupational facilities and be allowed some association with other prisoners.<sup>110</sup>

## **Chapter 5: The First Hunger Strike**

### **5.1 - The Strike is Declared**

On October 10, 1980 an announcement came from the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin, that a hunger strike would commence on October 27. The strikers had five demands:

1. The right not to wear a prison uniform;
2. The right not to do prison work;
3. The right of free association with other prisoners, and to organise educational and recreational pursuits;
4. The right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week;
5. Full restoration of remission lost through the protest.<sup>111</sup>

The hunger strikers' statement released at the beginning of the protest made clear that their aims were political. "We the Republican Prisoners of War in the H-Blocks, Long Kesh, demand as a right, political recognition and that we be accorded the status of

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<sup>108</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>111</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 16

political prisoners. We claim this right as captured combatants in the continuing struggle for national liberation and self-determination.”<sup>112</sup> They argued that the prison system and the policy of criminalization sought to delegitimize their aims and their organization. The statement also sought to articulate the prisoners’ view that the hunger strike was a last resort, and that “all channels had been exhausted.”<sup>113</sup>

The prisoners took the hunger strike action with consultation from the IRA leadership on the outside. Gerry Adams, a top leader in Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, and former prisoner, said that he and others within the outside leadership resisted the option of hunger strike. He felt that it would divert attention and energy away from the tasks of political development that he was prioritizing at the time. He also felt that a hunger strike would “prove an extremely draining experience for republicans” and that it might very well result not only in a loss of life, but also in a “deeply demoralizing defeat.”<sup>114</sup>

From the republican perspective, “the prison war” was completely justified. “These men have been arrested under special powers, interrogated in special centers, convicted in special courts under special rules brought about by special legislation. Are they not special category!!!”<sup>115</sup> Seven republican prisoners were selected to participate by the IRA prison leadership from a pool of volunteers. The strikers in the first hunger strike included Tom McFeeley, Sean McKenna, Leo Green, Tommy McKearney, and Raymond McCartney, all of the IRA, as well as John Nixon, a member of the smaller republican paramilitary, the Irish Nationalist Liberation Army.<sup>116</sup> The choice of seven was believed

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in B. Campbell, L. McKeown and F. O’Hagan (eds), *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle, 1976–1981* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994) 114.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.* 114

<sup>114</sup> Gerry Adams, *Before the Dawn*, (Dingle: Brandon Books, 1996) 285

<sup>115</sup> Ulster Executive of Sinn Féin, “Hunger Strike to the Death, 1980”, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, H-Block/Hunger Strike Box 1.

<sup>116</sup> McKeown, *Out of Time*, 75

by some to have some degree of historical significance. There had been seven signatories to the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic that began the struggle for Irish independence.<sup>117</sup> However, according to Brendan Hughes, the leader of the first hunger strike, the real reason was to ensure that the prisoners represented a wide geographical range; five of the six northern counties were represented. “The intention was to maximize support in all of the six counties.”<sup>118</sup>

On October 23, 1980, three days before the first hunger strike was scheduled to begin, the British Government attempted to diffuse the situation by making a small concession. It made a change in the prison regime that seemed, at first glance, to address one of the hunger strikers’ demands: the issue of clothing. The new prison rules would allow the prisoners a choice of costume that would allow them to wear prison-issued “civilian-type” clothing. This offering fell significantly short of the prisoners’ demand, which was for the right to wear their *own* clothing. Yet it was hoped that, even if it did not satisfy the protestors, it would undermine support for the protest within the community.<sup>119</sup>

Margaret Thatcher was questioned about this concession in the House of Commons, as Ulster unionists viewed it as a possible first stage of “capitulation to the evil murderers and men of violence in H-block”. The Prime Minister responded that the matter had been under consideration for some time. “The decision has been made and we shall stand by it. There will be no concessions to those on hunger strike – none at all.”<sup>120</sup> Plainly it had seemed best within the British Government to make the decision before the hunger strike began. Yet even then it was clear to the British Government that the costs of taking on a

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<sup>117</sup> English, *Armed Struggle*, 10-11.

<sup>118</sup> Laurence McKeown, *Out of Time*, (Belfast: Beyond The Pale, 2001), 78

<sup>119</sup> Dempsey, Paul D. Minister Plenipotentiary. “Letter to Dr. D. Neligan Assistant Secretary Department of Foreign Affairs, Dublin 2, November 12, 1980”, National Archives, Dublin

<sup>120</sup> Parliamentary Debates, “October 28, 1980”, TAOIS/2010/53/902, National Archives, Dublin

conciliatory stance towards the hunger strikers would potentially be high in terms of their own domestic support, particularly among the unionists in Northern Ireland.

At the onset it appeared that the declaration of a hunger strike boosted popular support for the prisoners' demands in a way that the blanket protest and the dirty protest had not. On October 26, the day before the prisoners went on hunger strike, 10,000 people took part in the demonstration in Belfast. This caught the authorities by surprise; they had only expected about half of that number. However, this initial enthusiasm seemed to taper off. The British Government assessment was that afterwards the crowds became smaller and the RUC appeared to be well able to handle the situation. It was accepted among British and Northern Ireland Office officials that tensions between communities in Northern Ireland would rise during the hunger strike.<sup>121</sup>

### 5.2: The Threat of International Concern

As the hunger strike situation began to heat up, it began to also draw increased international attention. International pressure to resolve the crisis was beginning to emerge, as was the consideration of the British government's image on the world stage. In addition, it had the potential to jeopardize new developments taking place in the area of British-Irish relations. A major component of the threat power the prisoners hoped to exercise with the hunger strikes was to strengthen external pressure on the British Government to concede or seek a solution.

The most concerned international observer was, understandably, the Republic of Ireland. The Taoiseach [Prime Minister] had made his concern about the hunger strike known to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher three days after the beginning of the hunger

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<sup>121</sup> Northern Ireland Office, "Northern Ireland Political Review - October 13-26, November 4 1980", National Archives, Dublin.

strike, citing the serious repercussions it would have on the security situation.<sup>122</sup>

According to Irish Ambassador to the United States, Sean Donlon, the events

“created a difficulty for the Irish Government because on the one hand no Irish government could demand of a British Government that it concede to the prisoners because after all in the Southern jurisdiction there was never any question of the government conceding to the demands of prisoners. On the other hand, all Irish governments realize unless the situation was handled with tact and with great care what would happen would be that support for the support for the IRA would inevitably increase.”<sup>123</sup>

The Irish Government had a shared interest with the British Government in ending the hunger strike, as they perceived a defeat of the IRA an opportunity to strengthen the forces of constitutional nationalism and the movement towards a political settlement in a wider Anglo-Irish context.<sup>124</sup> The Irish Government internally formulated its official position on the strikes. First it affirmed that it had always paid attention to the conditions of the prisoners in the H-Blocks and Armagh, and that their concern for the human rights of individual prisoners had been raised with British authorities.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, the Irish Government condemned the violent actions perpetrated by some of the prisoners and their organizations, which led them to oppose any measure, such as Special Category, that would imply that acts of violence could be condoned.<sup>126</sup> The Irish Government had made its deepening concern known to the British as the likelihood of a hunger strike grew, emphasizing the graveness of the emotional impact on public sympathies that a hunger strike would have in Ireland. It expressed their hopes that a formula could be found to resolve the hunger strikes without sacrificing the principle of no political status by humanizing the prison regime in Northern Ireland. In that vein, the

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<sup>122</sup> Haughey, Charles, “Letter to the Prime Minister, October 30, 1980,” TAOIS/2010/53/903, National Archives, Dublin

<sup>123</sup> Sean Donlon, interviewed in Hunger Strike, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 2006

<sup>124</sup> Kirwan, W. “Letter to Secretary to the Government - H-Blocks Hunger Strike”, DFA/2010/20/17, National Archives, Dublin.

<sup>125</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs, “Confidential Note on General Outline of Government Policy, 1980” DFA/2010/17, National Archives, Dublin

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.* 2

Irish Government had given the British information about the its own prison regime in the hope that it might assist them.<sup>127</sup>

The hunger strike crisis was also nearing its climax just as a key development was taking place in British-Irish relations. On December 8 1980, Margaret Thatcher and Charles Haughey held an “Anglo-Irish Summit” in Dublin Castle. At this summit, the two heads of state announced that they had commissioned joint studies to be carried out before their next meeting to give “special considerations to the totality of relationships within these islands.”<sup>128</sup> The studies were to cover a range of issues and institutional structures, including citizenship rights, economic cooperation, security and measures to promote mutual understanding. The communiqué released after the meeting noted that the two heads of state agreed that the interests of the peoples of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland were “inextricably linked” and there was hope that this new initiative would improve not only Anglo-Irish relations, but also management of Northern Ireland.<sup>129</sup>

However, even as cooperation with the Irish Government was reaching a new level of importance, the Prime Minister did not let the urging of the Irish Government to be flexible in finding a solution to the hunger strike deter her from a firm position. Following the Dublin conference, the Prime Minister was questioned on both the hunger strike and the nature of the cooperation between the UK and Ireland. On the hunger strike question, she laid down the government position of principle in strong unequivocal terms. “Murder is crime. Carrying explosives is a crime. Maiming is a crime. It must stay crime

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<sup>127</sup> *ibid.* 2

<sup>128</sup> Foreign Commonwealth Office, “Talks between Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Haughey, 8 December 1980” FCO/87/1066

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

in the ordinary since of the word. Murder is murder is murder. It is not, and never can be, a political crime.”<sup>130</sup>

Another country that expressed concern was the United States. As the world’s most powerful superpower, with a large Irish diaspora, the United States was of special concern for both political and security reasons. While attention to the Northern Ireland problem and prisoners in the H-Blocks had previously only been paid by politicians in heavily Irish congressional districts, such as that of Marie Howe of Massachusetts, now it was beginning to turn more heads. The strike started to raise media attention in major cities with sizable Irish-American populations, such as Boston and San Francisco. Four US Congressmen (Biaggi, Fish, Gilman, and Wolf)<sup>131</sup> asked the US delegation to the UN to “become involved in a mediating capacity” to end the hunger strike.<sup>132</sup> Some state governments, such as the New York State Assembly, as well as the Pennsylvania State Senate<sup>133</sup>, passed special H-Block resolutions in support of a settlement.<sup>134</sup> Finally, on December 3, a number of US Congressman belonging to the Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs read statements critical of British handling of the strikes ”into the record” before Congress adjourned for Christmas.<sup>135</sup>

Both the British and the Irish governments viewed public opinion in the United States as being absolutely critical to win. So did the IRA, which received significant

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<sup>130</sup>Margaret Thatcher, “Press Conference after Anglo-Irish summit” December 8, 1980, Thatcher Archive, <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/104456>

<sup>131</sup>Congressman Mario Biaggi (D-NY), Hamilton Fish (R-NY), James Walsh (R-NY), and Ben Gilman (R-NY)

<sup>132</sup>Northern Ireland Office, “Northern Ireland Political Review – November 17-December 3, December 15, 1980” National Archives, Kew

<sup>133</sup>Senate of Pennsylvania, “November 17, 1980”, National Archives, Dublin

<sup>134</sup>Northern Ireland Office, “Northern Ireland Political Review – November 17-December 3, December 15, 1980”

<sup>135</sup>Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs, “Statement for the Record – Irish Hunger Strikes, December 3, 1980” National Archives, Dublin.

funding and arms from Irish-American groups such as Northern Ireland Aid (NORAIID). Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey warned the British Government that if the IRA were able to influence Irish-American perceptions of the situation, it would create a spike of support for groups that supported them and thus greatly endanger the security situation for both the Republic and the UK.<sup>136</sup>

The other prominent international figure voicing concern about the hunger strike at this time was the Vatican. From the time the strike was announced the Pope had made his concern about the situation known to the British Government. On October 23 he wrote a letter to Margaret Thatcher about the protesting prisoners in the Maze. Following this letter, he also sent a personal telegram to the Prime Minister.<sup>137</sup> In “the spirit of the call for peace and reconciliation” that he had spoken of during his visit to Ireland the previous year, the Pope expressed his concern for the effect the strikes would have on the prisoners themselves, but also the repercussions it would have on the entire situation in Northern Ireland.<sup>138</sup> He hoped that Thatcher would consider “possible solutions in order to avoid irreversible consequences that could perhaps prove irreparable.”<sup>139</sup>

In her response to the communications from the Pope, the Prime Minister repeated the Government’s position that they could not endorse the position that those who commit crimes are somehow less culpable because of “political” motives. She also cited the findings of the ECHR to support this position. She then referenced the Government’s concession on clothing before the start of the hunger strike as evidence that it was committed to prison reform even though it would not concede the principle of

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<sup>136</sup> Haughey, Charles, “Letter to the Prime Minister, 1980” National Archives, Dublin

<sup>137</sup> Holy See, “Telegram to FCO, ‘Ulster Prisoners’ 30 October, 1980” PREM/19/282, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*



special category. Finally, she offered to discuss the matter with His Holiness during her upcoming visit to Rome.<sup>140</sup>

### 5.3 - The Confused Ending

By December, the hunger strike had become the main issue relating to Northern Ireland. The strike itself had grown substantially in size as three women in Armagh Gaol, the women's prison, joined the original seven prisoners in refusing food on December 1. In an interesting development, the loyalist Ulster Defense Association (UDA) announced on December 7 that six of its imprisoned members would begin their own hunger strike for the restoration of special category status, and complete segregation from Republican prisoners.<sup>141</sup> An additional 30 republican prisoners in the Maze also threatened to join their comrades on hunger strike on Monday December 15.<sup>142</sup>

In addition to the growth of the protest, a new sense of urgency had taken hold as one of the original hunger strikers, Sean McKenna, was reaching a critical point in the decline of his health, and was unable to keep down water. A consultant physician warned that he was in urgent need of vitamin treatment to avoid serious and potentially irreversible damage to his sight.<sup>143</sup> He was slipping into a coma and near death. To further complicate matters, the leader of the hunger strikes, Brendan Hughes, had promised Sean that he would not let him die.<sup>144</sup> This commitment significantly handicapped the freedom of Hughes to maneuver in high pressure negotiations.

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<sup>140</sup> Margaret. Thatcher, "Letter to His Holiness November 16, 1980", PREM/19/283, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>141</sup> Northern Ireland Office, "Northern Ireland Political Review - November 4- December 7, December 15, 1980", National Archives, Dublin.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Harrington, BA. "Letter to Mr. Billeloch, 'Weekend of 13/14 December', 15 December, 1980", National Archives, Kew.

<sup>144</sup> Hughes, Brendan, interviewed in Maloney, Ed, *Voices from the Grave*, (The Boston College Irish Center's Oral History Archive, Trustees of Boston College, 2010) 240.

Permission to visit the H-blocks prison was granted to Danny Morrison, public relations director for Provisional Sinn Féin. Morrison was told that the prison was ‘about to explode’ and that the prisoners felt that both he and John Hume were being ‘taken for a ride by the Brits’.<sup>145</sup> Following this meeting, Bobby Sands, the Officer Commanding of the IRA in the Maze, requested that a private meeting be permitted between himself, Brendan Hughes, anti H-Block activist Bernadette McAliskey, and a fourth person whose name has been blacked out of the official record. The Secretary of State was recommended by his officials to refuse the request. Such a meeting would be perceived as a ‘Council of War’ and would lead the Government down a road towards a meeting between leaders of the protest with the Secretary of State. This path towards official negotiations could not be allowed as it would, in a different sense, give the prisoners a form of political status.<sup>146</sup> By entering directly into talks with the IRA, the British Government feared that it would legitimize the organization.

On December 17, the Secretary of State outlined the position he would be taking with regards to the Government’s case. The Government’s position was kept the same as it had been set out in the Secretary of State’s statement on December 4. Firm consistency of the Government’s hard-line stance was viewed as paramount regarding both the public and the prisoners. According to British government documents, “It is vital that this [consistency] should be hammered home for two reasons: first, so that the community as a whole sees that the Government is both responsible and human; and second because the

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<sup>145</sup> Harrington, BA. “Letter to Mr. Bllloch, ‘Weekend of 13/14 December’, 15 December, 1980,” PREM/19/283, National Archives, Kew

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*

prisoners may even at this late hour not have hoisted aboard what is available and the fact that they could ‘honourably’ give up now.”<sup>147</sup>

On December 18, the NIO issued a document that set out the authorities’ view of what would happen when the protests ended. The prisoners would be given clean cells with furniture; within a few days clothing provided by their families would be given to them for recreation, association, and visits, as well as ‘civilian type clothing’ for everyday wear; there would be access to parcels and visits; free association within each wing in the evening and on weekends; and there was the prospect of remission being restored.<sup>148</sup> The statement claimed that they did not want the prisoners to die, though if they did “it would be from their own choice.” If they accepted the British conditions, “the conditions available to them meet in a practical and humane way the kind of things they have been asking for.” However, the Government felt that they needed to continue their strong stance by saying, “But we shall not let the way we run the prisons be determined by hunger strikes of any other threat.”<sup>149</sup> The statement concluded by underscoring the fact that this offer was final, there was nothing to be gained by fasting to the death, and “The time to stop is now.”<sup>150</sup>

The British Government judged that there were two major objections to the use of the various mediators who had offered their services. The first was that this would lead the Government to fall under pressure to use representatives from the IRA. This was an obvious problem, as the Government wanted to maintain its position of power in such a

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<sup>147</sup> Hopkins, MW “Letter to Michael Allison, December 17, 1980” FCO/87/1068, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>148</sup> Northern Ireland Office, “What Will Happen When the Protests End, 18 December, 1980”, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, H-Block/Hunger Strike Box 1.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.* 3

situation. The second objection was that no mediator of any standing could avoid eventually becoming a negotiator. With the mediation path ruled out and a hard-line stance decided upon, the Secretary of State proposed that the text of his statement from December 4 be read and explained to the prisoners, so they knew the facilities and rights or privileges available to them on the condition that they end the protest.

At this point the story of the hunger strikes became quite confused. According to Gerry Adams and other IRA sources, a secret channel between the IRA and the British Government had been reactivated. This mediator was known as “the Mountain Climber”.<sup>151</sup> Through this backchannel the British seemed to offer what the prisoners understood to be the substance of the five demands. Though not entirely what they wanted, the negotiator told the prisoners that it would constitute a “Portlaoise-type agreement,” in reference to the prison regime that had been adopted with IRA prisoners in the South.<sup>152</sup> The text of the document would be delivered to them the next morning. According to leader of the strike, Brendan Hughes, “this was when the brinkmanship started – we were holding out; they were holding out.”<sup>153</sup> The prisoners decided to hold on for as long as they could in order to try and extract more. They insisted on guarantors, such as the IRA leadership from outside the prison or the trusted clergyman Father Faul, who could confirm that the proposals were real.

However, with Sean McKenna on the brink of death, Brendan Hughes made the fateful call to end the strike. He did so with no guarantee of the deal that had been offered to the prisoners by the British government. According to Hughes, the strike ended more

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<sup>151</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 3-4, 30

<sup>152</sup> Hughes, Brendan, interviewed in Maloney, Ed, *Voices from the Grave*, (The Boston College Irish Center’s Oral History Archive, Trustees of Boston College, 2010) 238

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.* 238

out of the need to save Sean's life than out of a sense of political victory.<sup>154</sup> He confirmed the motives behind this decision with researchers from Boston College:

Q: So is it fair to say that the hunger strike then did not end as a result of the document but the hunger strike ended prior to the document and it was in many respects the humanitarian decision on your part – you were bound by your word?

A: Yes.<sup>155</sup>

Whatever the case, the document that arrived at the prison after the strike had been called off was not the settlement the prisoners had hoped for. Although Sands thought there was the basis for a settlement in the document, it needed further clarification and more work done on it before it would be considered acceptable to the prisoners.<sup>156</sup> The document was found to be vague and open to interpretation. This led to problems with its implementation by the guards in the prison. The prisoners believed that they were being given a settlement that would, in effect meet their five demands, and now it appeared that the Government was reneging on their word, claiming that was not what was agreed on.<sup>157</sup> Some accounts claim that men who had begun to conform to prison rules did not receive their own clothes from prison authorities, and that overall there was reluctance on the part of the prison authorities to implement the positive aspects of the document. Having ended their strike, the prisoners had lost their leverage to effectively bargain.<sup>158</sup> It seemed to the prisoners that the British had beaten them at this round of the game by dishonestly persuading them that they could reach the compromise state (3,3), and then unilaterally changing their minds and reverting to a hard-line

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.* 240

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.* 240

<sup>156</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 30

<sup>157</sup> National H-Block/Armagh Committee, "British Renege on Hunger Strike Commitments, Dublin, 1981" Linen Hall Library Political Collection, H-Block/Hunger Strike Box 1

<sup>158</sup> Ian Mulgrew, "Weakened guerrillas tricked by U.K., Irish journalist says", *The Globe and Mail*, 12 March, 1981

position. Though the accounts of the activities of “the Mountain Climber” are unclear, one thing remains certain: the prisoners made the decision to strike again.

## **Chapter 6: The Second Hunger Strike**

### **6.1: A Strike to the Death**

According to the prison OC at the time, Bik McFarlane, the second strike was as much a political maneuver as the first one had been. “The analysis hadn’t changed. We were in a conflict situation. There was no difference between then and the previous October 1980, the analysis was the same, there was one option that we had. We believed we could still shift them. That was a very firm belief.”<sup>159</sup> However, given the consensus that the first hunger strike had ended in failure, there was reluctance on the part of the outside leadership to try this tactic a second time. According to Gerry Adams, the leadership on the outside was concerned not only about the very high possibility that lives would be lost, but also that a hunger strike failure would “divert attention and energy from the tasks of political development...”<sup>160</sup> At the time, Adams says he considered building Sinn Féin’s political capacity and capability to be the top priority, and a demoralizing defeat in the hunger strikes would be a draining experience for republicans.

The second hunger strike was structured much differently than the first. Rather than having seven prisoners go on strike all at once, the timing of each strike was staggered. Bobby Sands was the first to start, refusing food for the first time on March 1, 1981. The following three strikers entered the protest each at two-week intervals.<sup>161</sup> This was a strategic move on the part of the IRA, which could not afford another failure after

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<sup>159</sup> Bik McFarlane, interviewed in McKeown, *Out of Time*, 77

<sup>160</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 285

<sup>161</sup> Campbell, McKeown, and O’Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, 147

the first hunger strike. The two-week gap between the start of each prisoners' fast was designed to give the British ample breathing room between deaths so that there would be the opportunity for negotiations to be worked out. It was also decided that once one of the original four hunger strikers died, a new prisoner would join the strike as his replacement.<sup>162</sup>

However, as with the first hunger strike, there was reluctance on the part of the outside republican leadership to approve the strikes. After the collapse of the first hunger strike, there was skepticism that hunger strike action would produce a threat sufficient to move the British Government. According to Adams, the leadership wanted to refocus their attention on political development. A hunger strike would demand the exclusive attention of the movement. Adams made his opposition to this tactic clear to Bobby Sands, the leader of the second strike. "'Bobby,' I wrote 'we are tactically, strategically, physically and morally opposed to a hunger strike.'"<sup>163</sup> However, the prisoners appealed to the leadership, saying that the struggle in the H-blocks was unsustainable, and reaffirmed their decision to begin a hunger strike. In this case it appeared that the prisoners were able to exercise a degree of autonomy in choosing the tactics they would take against the British Government.

On February 5, 1981, the announcement of the second hunger strike was made. It was clear at the outset of this hunger strike as well that the strikers viewed their protest not as a quest for improved prison conditions, but for political recognition. In their statement, the prisoners said: "We the republican political prisoners in the H-blocks of long kesh and Armagh having waited patiently for 7 weeks for evidence that the British

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<sup>162</sup> *ibid.* 147

<sup>163</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 288.

Government was prepared to resolve the prison crisis, and having given them every available opportunity to do so, declare out intention of hunger striking once more.”<sup>164</sup>

The prison was just another battlefield on which they were fighting what they viewed as a war of liberation for the Irish people. On 1 March, 1981 Bobby Sands, once the OC of the prisoners, and now leader of the second hunger strike, wrote in the diary he kept on pieces of toilet paper, “I am a political prisoner. I am a political prisoner because I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to withdraw from our land.”<sup>165</sup>

Bobby Sands was seen as the natural leader for the next hunger strike. He had been the OC in the prison during the first hunger strike. Prior to that Sands had also taken on leadership roles within the prison hierarchy writing for the Republican newspaper, *An Phlabaht*, using the name of his sister, Marcella, as his pen name. He was known for engaging fellow prisoners in telling Irish legends, writing poetry and songs, and teaching the Irish language as a method to communicate throughout the prison. Sands also had a personal narrative that made him a sympathetic figure. He had spent his early years in the predominantly Protestant suburb of Newtonabbey. When it was discovered that the family was Catholic, they came under neighbor pressure and moved to Rathcoole, another predominantly Protestant area, when Bobby was seven years old. Here again they were subject to anti-Catholic intimidation, though this time of a more violent nature. After the UDA threw a rubbish bin through their living room window, the family moved

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<sup>164</sup> Statement by the PRO H-Blocks 3, 4, 5, 6 and PRO Women Political Prisoners, Armagh Jail, February 4, 1981, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, H-Block/Hunger Strike Box 1

<sup>165</sup> Bobby Sands. *The Diary of Bobby Sands*. (Dublin: Sinn Fein Bookshop, 2011) 3



again, this time to the Catholic estate of Twinbrook on the outskirts of Belfast, where Bobby joined the IRA shortly after.

The British Government was caught unawares and in a dilemma after the onset of the second strike. Were it to soften the policy on special category status or change the prison regime in any way, it would enrage the unionist constituency. Furthermore, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had begun taking steps to placate the fears of angered unionists who felt that their constitutional status was being threatened after hearing the Irish Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, and Irish Foreign Minister, Brian Lenihan, make public statements of “the totality of relationships.” On March 5, 1981, Thatcher flew to Belfast where she made a speech that said, “There is no sell-out and those who argue otherwise have simply got it wrong or are choosing not to understand the purpose of my discussions with Mr. Haughey.”<sup>166</sup> She emphasized her government’s commitment to the Northern Ireland Constitution Act of 1973, which guaranteed the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom as long as it was the wish of the regional majority.

## 6.2: Election Success

The second hunger strike took a fateful and unexpected turn with the sudden death of Frank Maguire MP on March 5, 1981. Maguire was an independent nationalist MP for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the Westminster Parliament. This constituency was finely balanced, with a narrow majority of Catholic voters over Protestants. Maguire himself had been a former IRA internee who had spent time in Long Kesh. He had been a supporter of the prisoners’ five demands going back to the blanket

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<sup>166</sup> Margaret Thatcher, “Speech in Belfast, March 5, 1981,” The Thatcher Archives, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104589>

and the dirty protests, even taking it upon himself to raise allegations of ill treatment to the NIO.<sup>167</sup>

After Maguire's death, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, a socialist and anti H-Block activist, expressed her intention to run for the seat.<sup>168</sup> She had previously been elected to the Westminster Parliament at the age of 21 and had represented neighboring mid-Ulster.<sup>169</sup> She was among the most famous of the Civil Rights and People's Democracy activists of the late 1960 and early 1970s, and would likely have received a high vote. She was competing for the nationalist vote with Austin Currie, a moderate SDLP candidate that had been backed by the Catholic Church, something she was vehemently opposed to.

“We now had this unseemly situation where we had two candidates in an election and a prisoner dying. So we were running a duel campaign on the ground saying, ‘I’m not standing back for the Bishop; I’d stand back for the prisoner but not back for the Bishop’, and creating the momentum where people were then going to Sinn Féin saying, ‘Will you let the prisoner stand?’ So they started negotiations to see if they would stand their prisoner.”<sup>170</sup>

The prospect of standing for elections was new for this generation of republicans. It was also potentially risky. On the one hand it would provide the IRA with an opportunity to gain a “mandate” and demonstrate to the British that they had popular support. On the other hand, if Sands lost the result would be devastating. As Sinn Féin Sinn Féin Director of Publicity, Danny Morrison, said, ““The danger was if Bobby Sands lost by five votes, one vote, Thatcher would crow, ‘Even your own people rejected

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<sup>167</sup> Jackson, SC. “Letter to Mr. Alison, ‘Allegations by Mr. Frank Maguire, MP, about Prison Conditions’, 13 November, 1979”, NIO/12/153, PRONI, Belfast.

<sup>168</sup> Reuters, “Bernadette Devlin discloses she will run for parliament”, *The New York Times, Late City Final Edition*, 22 March, 1981.

<sup>169</sup> Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, *Price of My Soul*, (London: Pan Books, 1969) 171

<sup>170</sup> McAliskey, Bernadette, interviewed in *Hunger Strike*, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 2006

you.”<sup>171</sup> However, the IRA Army Council after secret consultations with the prisoners’ leaders took the risky decision to run Bobby Sands as a candidate in the by-election.<sup>172</sup> The election campaign fulfilled the major objective of republican leader Gerry Adams, who would later become president of the IRA’s political wing, Sinn Féin, which was to develop the republican movement politically. As he recalls that period:

“The campaign was an education for us. We galvanized our people in Fermanagh and Tyrone, and they responded with great commitment....We learned about presiding officers, personation officers, how to campaign. It was exhilarating”<sup>173</sup>

Notably, Bobby Sands was the only Catholic candidate in the race. In addition to McAliskey, other nationalist candidates had also expressed interest in the seat. The moderate SDLP had originally put forth Austin Currie as their candidate. However, they withdrew from the race believing that Noel Maguire, the brother of the MP that had just died, would contest the seat. However, once it was announced that Sinn Féin would allow Sands to run, pressure began to mount to not allow the nationalist vote to be divided. Noel Maguire withdrew from the race, less than 10 minutes before the deadline, claiming it was a “matter of conscience.”<sup>174</sup> The election was a success for the prisoners: Bobby Sands narrowly defeated the Unionist candidate, Harry West, a former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, and a former Stormont minister, receiving 30,492 votes to West’s 29,046.<sup>175</sup> The election turnout was also extremely high: a reported 87%.<sup>176</sup> The election of Bobby Sands represented a watershed moment in the history of the Northern Ireland conflict. It was the first electoral success for this generation of militant republicans.

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<sup>171</sup> Morrison, Danny, interviewed in *Hunger Strike*, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 2006

<sup>172</sup> This is a terminological difference meaning a special election

<sup>173</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 291.

<sup>174</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Irelands Ordeal 1966-1996 and the Search for Peace*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 278

<sup>175</sup> William Borders “Jailed IRA Member Wins Commons Seat”, 10 April, 1981 New York Times Late City Final Edition, Sec.1 p.1

<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*

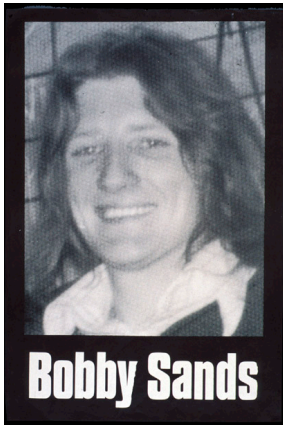


Figure 3

Republican prisoners received the news with jubilation, believing that this show of popular support would save Sands' life.<sup>177</sup> Many were of the impression that Thatcher would not be able to allow a fellow MP to die on hunger strike. The republicans had the impression that a strong showing of popular support for their protest would even further increase their threat power. If they could demonstrate that there was an untapped reservoir of popular support for the prisoners, they believed it would give their demands legitimacy that would force the British Government to make concessions. In some ways, it could be argued that with the election of Sands the prisoners had won political status, because they had successfully built a political movement in support of their cause. How could Sands be nothing more than a criminal or a murderer if he was able to garner over 30,000 votes?

Unionists, by contrast, viewed the election as evidence that all Catholics were deeply sectarian, and at the limit tacit supporters of republicans, and saw it as unconscionable that almost the entire Catholic community would actively support and elect a member of the IRA. This served to further polarization between the two communities. However, in an interview days after the election, Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey argued that the election results were not, in fact a vote for violence. According to him "The vote was a manifestation of two different traditions and two different positions."<sup>178</sup> Anyone who went forward as an anti-unionist candidate would get the nationalist vote. He argued that the high nationalist turnout had been motivated by that

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<sup>177</sup> McKeown, *Out of Time*, 78

<sup>178</sup> Charles Haughey, interviewed on *RTE Radio*, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 12 April, 1981, INF/4/200, Kew.

tradition of opposition to unionism as well as humanitarian feeling for the H-Block situation.

### 6.3: Mediation Failures

As the hunger strikers continued their fast and began to enter a critical stage, the Irish Government hoped that a solution could be found through mediation. Three Irish Members of the European Parliament, Mr. Neil Blaney, Dr. John O'Connell, and Miss Sile de Valera, paid visits to Bobby Sands. When these Irish Parliamentarians tried to visit Thatcher, however, they were denied a meeting.<sup>179</sup> The Prime Minister said in a press conference in Riyadh at the time, 'it is not my habit or custom to meet MPs from a foreign country about a citizen of the United Kingdom resident in the United Kingdom.'<sup>180</sup> She said that the proper way for them to proceed would be to return to Dublin and have the government there make representation to her through ordinary diplomatic channels.<sup>181</sup>

The European Commission for Human Rights (ECHR) was again another avenue through which Charles Haughey sought to find a settlement. He met with Marcela Sands, the sister of Bobby Sands, and on April 23, 1981, convinced her to make an application on behalf of her brother to the ECHR. In this effort he had behind-the-scenes support from the British government. The next day a message from the British Ambassador to Ireland told the Taoiseach, "We would not oppose an intervention by the European Commission for Human Rights provided that the commission's involvement is brought about in the only way in which it can be brought about with the willing participation of

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<sup>179</sup> Christopher Thomas, "Mrs. Thatcher snubs Eire MPS over Sands plea", *The Times*, 22 April, 1981, p. 1

<sup>180</sup> RW Apple Jr. "Mrs. Thatcher Rebuffs Irish M.P.'S on Robert Sands, Jailed IRA Leader." *New York Times, Late City Final Edition*, 22 April, 1981, sec A, p.4, col. 3

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*

HMG, namely by accepting and responding to a complaint made from one of the hunger strikers.”<sup>182</sup> Furthermore the British Government would facilitate a visit to the Maze for two members of the commission.

This British Government followed through with this support. The following day, two delegates from the ECHR, Carl Norgaard of Denmark and Torkel Opsahl of Norway, as well as three members of the Dáil visited Bobby Sands.<sup>183</sup> When the ECHR delegates tried to hold a private meeting with Sands, he refused to see them unless Prison OC, Brendan “Bik” Macfarlane, as well as Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison of Sinn Féin were also present.<sup>184</sup> He did not want to adopt his sister’s application to the ECHR, and it has been said, gave a strong rebuke to the Taoiseach’s initiative,

“Because Mr. Haughey has the means to end the H-Block/Armagh crisis and has consistently refused to do so, I view his prompting of my family as cynical and cold-blooded manipulation of people clearly vulnerable to this type of pressure. The Commissioners’ intervention has been diversionary and has served to aid the British attempts to confuse the issue.”<sup>185</sup>

The Northern Ireland Office felt that Sands’ conditions for meeting the ECHR were unacceptable and thus the meeting was unable to take place. Here again was a struggle over who would maintain the upper hand; the British Government refused to relinquish its power over the any mediation or settlement by allowing the prisoners to dictate the terms of a meeting. On May 4, the day before Sands died, the Commission announced that it had no power to hear the case.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Deaglán de Béadun, “UK encouraged human rights approach to Maze”, *Irish Times*, 31 December, 2011, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/1231/1224309675084.html>

<sup>183</sup> AP, “AROUND THE WORLD: Two Rights Aides Will Visit Irish Hunger Striker in Jail” *New York Times*, *Late City Final Edition*, sec. 1, p. 6, 25 April, 1981.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 304

<sup>186</sup> Deaglán de Béadun, “UK encouraged human rights approach to Maze”, *The Irish Times*, December 31, 2011, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/1231/1224309675084.html>

However, the British did not give up the prospect that the ECHR might be able to serve as a vehicle out of the predicament. The British Ambassador to Dublin commented in a memo to the Taoiseach that though it was a “great pity” that the initiative had not succeeded, and did not see how it could be revived in the Sands case, “a similar initiative might have a better chance of working in the case of other hunger strikers.”<sup>187</sup> Thus they kept it in their minds as a possibility and continued to regard this humanitarian framing of the issue as a possible face-saving solution.

Although not meant to be a negotiation, another international figure that was allowed to enter the prison in the hope of intervening was Monsignor John Magee, personal secretary to the Pope, and himself an Irishman from Ulster. He had been granted a meeting with Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins “on the clear understanding that the Government’s position in relation to the hunger strike would not be subject to challenge or a matter for negotiation.”<sup>188</sup> Mgr. Magee met with all four of the prisoners on hunger strike at that time. When he asked Bobby Sands what would end the strike he was told that granting the five demands. The meeting itself was fruitless; it was clear that neither side was going to move enough for a settlement to be brokered.

Following the death of Bobby Sands, popular emotions had risen to dangerously high levels and were predictably followed by chaotic scenes on the streets. By April 22, the majority Catholic city of Londonderry in Northern Ireland had been consumed by seven days of riots.<sup>189</sup> The violence soon spread to cities throughout the province. Youth

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<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Christopher Thomas and John Witherow, “Papal envoy sees Sands again”, *The Times*, April 30, 1981, p. 1, col. G; Issue 60915

<sup>189</sup> Staff reports, “7<sup>th</sup> Day of Londonderry Rioting”, *The Washington Post*, First Section; Around the World; A24, April 22, 1981

engaged in battles with British troops and the police, throwing stones and firebombs.<sup>190</sup> The IRA increased targeted attacks on both British troops and prison guards. Yet, some casualties during this time came not from the actions of the rioters, but the retaliation of the security forces: two were killed when an army Land-Rover plowed into a crowd, and one teenager was killed by a plastic bullet fired during a clash in Londonderry.<sup>191</sup>

The British Government found itself stuck: the stance it had taken alienated them further from the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, which already viewed it with hostility. This alienation of Catholics from government policy was seen to be increasing support for the IRA, exactly the opposite of what the policy of criminalization had been intended to do. However, the Government felt that the violence and unrest could be contained. “Neither the riots, nor the scale of terrorist activity were as substantial as in the past. The government was in no danger of defeat.”<sup>192</sup>

As Sands drew close to death, loyalist paramilitary groups braced themselves for an anticipated explosion of violence. The week leading up to his death, 1,000 unarmed Ulster Defense Association members massed in a show of defensive strength near the border with predominantly Catholic neighborhoods in West Belfast.<sup>193</sup> The militant Democratic Unionist MP and cleric Reverend Ian Paisley, warned the crowd, “War is no doubt going to be unleashed on us.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> David McKittrick, et al. *Lost Lives* p. 856. For full records of the over 60 casualties during the second hunger strike period see pages 852-877

<sup>192</sup> Alexander, Michael. “Letter to Stephen Boys Smith, ‘Northern Ireland’ 27 May, 1981”, PREM/19/505, Kew.

<sup>193</sup> Leonard, Downie Jr., “Sands' Mother: 'He Is Prepared For the End'”, *The Washington Post*, First Section; A1, May 1, 1981

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*





**Figure 4**

Bobby Sands died on May 5, 1981, 66 days after his strike had begun. On that day, Thatcher made a statement in the House of Commons in which she said, “Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to many of its victims.”<sup>195</sup>

However, Sands’ funeral was a world event. News outlets around the world covered it, and foreign journalists descended upon Belfast. The record of this

coverage and the pulse of worldwide public opinion is mixed. According to the files from the UK Information Office, much of the mainstream newspapers in the UK, Ireland, and the United States followed the British Government line. They rebuked Sands for his violence and that of his organization, frequently using the term “terrorist” to describe him.<sup>196</sup> However, some countries and political groups reacted to the struggle as a symbol of a stand against British imperialism. The opposition party in Indian parliament observed a minute of silence, the French Communist Party released a statement, a balloon full of tomato sauce was hurled at the Queen on her visit to Sweden, and the Iranian government not only sent its ambassador in Sweden to the funeral, it later renamed the street on which the British Embassy had been after Sands—it remains an issue between the two governments to this day.<sup>197</sup>

Though Bobby Sands’ death was the most iconic of all the hunger strikers, it was just the beginning of the unrest that would grow as the hunger strike continued. Francis

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<sup>195</sup> “House of Commons PQs, 5 May, 1981”, <http://www.margareththatcher.org/document/104641>

<sup>196</sup> Information Office, “Comment on Northern Ireland” INF/40/200, National Archives, Kew

<sup>197</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 99.

Hughes became the second hunger striker to die on May 12, less than a week later.<sup>198</sup> After Hughes' death another wave of violence broke out in Belfast and Londonderry, along with a 2000 person protest in Dublin, where demonstrators threw rocks and bottles at the British embassy, and baton-wielding officers later charged to disperse the mob.<sup>199</sup> After the third and fourth hunger strikers, Raymond McCreech and Patsy O'Hara, died on May 23, protesters turned violent and targeted British soldiers. Five British soldiers were killed in McCreech's home county of Armagh when a remote control bomb exploded their armored vehicle.<sup>200</sup> Reacting to the soldiers' deaths, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said, "I hope that when their murderers have been tried and convicted, no one will claim that they are entitled to special privileges."<sup>201</sup> The predictions that both the British and Irish government had of hunger strike deaths causing violent unrest were proving to be dangerously accurate.

The deaths during the spring of 1981 also had a pervasive effect on Northern Ireland politics that created concerns for the British Government and its counterpart in the Republic. The tense political atmosphere caused by the hunger strike was having a clearly polarizing effect. Republicans made electoral gains at the expense of moderate nationalists. The moderate SDLP won 84 seats in the 1981 Local Government elections, down from 113 in 1977. The non-sectarian moderate Alliance Party lost 25% of its council seats across Northern Ireland. The inroads made by hardliner parties were not limited to the Republicans and the Catholic Nationalist community. The party of militant Protestant leader Reverend Ian Paisley, the Democratic Unionist Party, won 139 seats,

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<sup>198</sup> Leonard Downie Jr. "2nd IRA Member Dies on Hunger Strike; Death of IRA Terrorist Sparks New Violence", *Washington Post*, First Section; A1, May 13, 1981.

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> AP, "New Ulster Unrest Leaves One Dead 20 Injured, *New York Times*, May 23, 1981.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*

double the number it had won in the previous election<sup>202</sup> It was clear that both unionists and nationalists were gravitating away from moderates and towards more hard line candidates. This was seen as a significant threat to the long-term prospects of peace in the province.

Tensions surrounding the hunger strike reached danger point at the same time as political transition in the South. In May, as the country prepared for a general election, a British official reported to the NIO that there was the risk that supporters of Provisional Sinn Féin could take six seats.<sup>203</sup> Emboldened by their political success in Fermanagh/South Tyrone, Republicans put up nine republican prisoners – four of them hunger strikers – as candidates. After voters went to the polls on June 11, two prisoner candidates – Paddy Agnew and Kieran Doherty – were elected; a third, Joe McDonnell, came within 300 votes of being elected.<sup>204</sup> As it happened, “In the Irish election the H Block candidates did better than anyone had predicted, polling over 42000 first preference votes and getting 2 members elected in Border constituencies. This suggests that the Fermanagh by-election was not a passing phenomenon.”<sup>205</sup>

This was alarming not only to the Irish Government and mainstream parties, but also to the British Government, who recognized that it would have adverse political effects. “A little bad luck could bring us on to a slippery downhill slope in relation to our entire policy towards Northern Ireland”<sup>206</sup> The British Government was coming under intensified pressure from the Irish, and it felt that the “rights and wrongs of the situation”

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<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Boys Smith SW. “Letter to Clive Whitmore, ‘Northern Ireland: The Protestant Community’ 26 May, 1981”, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew, Paragraph 53

<sup>204</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 297

<sup>205</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “Northern Ireland: Political Development and the Prison Situation, 17 June, 1981” PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew. 2

<sup>206</sup> *ibid.* 1

were being obscured by fear that it was letting the strike get out of control and failing to recognize the serious side effects: polarization in the North, hostility towards Britain, and possible turbulence in the South.<sup>207</sup> In a phone conversation, an Irish official described the situation to be, “difficult, and is going downhill. The more things are suppressed in the North, the more they break out elsewhere.”<sup>208</sup> The actual statement he made two days later did indeed assert that the “primary responsibility rests on the British Government to make an immediate effort to find a solution, not only because of the situation in Northern Ireland, but in the interests of the future relations between our two countries.”<sup>209</sup>

In the midst of the death and disorder caused by the hunger strike, the IRA decided to escalate the hunger strike even further. While the original four hunger strikers had begun their fasts two weeks apart, the prisoners were now putting a new man on the strike every week beginning with Tom McElwee on June 8. This tactical shift sought to capitalize on the intense atmosphere. According to Bik McFarlane, the prisoners decided that this “calculated risk” to increase the numbers would add a more constant and concentrated form of pressure on the Brits to seek a settlement.<sup>210</sup> This “ensured that if the Brits wanted to ride out the storm of Joe McDonnell dying they would have to be prepared for a succession of potential hunger strikes...”<sup>211</sup> The prisoners had upped the anti, so to speak, and with more lives potentially in the balance, the stakes could not have been any higher as the search for a settlement reached a critical juncture.

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<sup>207</sup> Figg. “Telegram Number 199 to FCO ‘Hunger Strike’ June 17, 1981”, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew

<sup>208</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, Untitled Document, June 18, 1981 PREM/19/505, Kew

<sup>209</sup> “Statement made by the Taoiseach, June 29, 1981”, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew

<sup>210</sup> Bik McFarlane, interviewed in Campbell, McKeown, and O’Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, 181.

<sup>211</sup> *ibid.* 181

#### 6.4: International Mediation vs. Secret Negotiation

With the hunger strikes effects being so widespread and intense, the British government began to feel the need to do something to stop the loss of human life.<sup>212</sup> The costs of maintaining a hard line position were mounting. Within Northern Ireland it was increasingly alienating the Catholic nationalist community and the increased number of deaths from riots and paramilitary murders threatened to undue years of progress made in reducing the violence. However, it was also an embarrassing situation for the British government on the international front as well. Increasingly, it looked as though the strikes could destabilize the neighboring Republic of Ireland, and jeopardize the diplomatic relations between these two countries. Yet since the government had maintained such a hard line throughout the crisis this far, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was of the opinion that “A move by us [the British Government] now would be seen – in Northern Ireland by Protestants and Provisionals – as a signal that we [the British Government] were cracking.”<sup>213</sup> However, the Secretary of State also put forward the idea of an intervention through a credible and impartial international body was seen to be a possible way to resolve the crisis.<sup>214</sup> This would give the British Government means to guard itself against the negative backlash that it would face for conceding to the prisoners, especially from the unionists, while at the same time signaling to the nationalist community that it was trying to be reasonable.

The British thought that international interest in Western Europe might increase when it was made public that the European Commission on Human Rights (ECHR) had

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<sup>212</sup> Foreign Commonwealth Office, “Letter to Humphrey Atkins, 29 June 1981”, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew

<sup>213</sup> Humphrey Atkins, “Prime Minister – Northern Ireland: the Hunger Strike, 2 July 1981” PREM 19/505, National Archives, Kew

<sup>214</sup> *ibid.* 4

declared admissible two outstanding complaints by protesting prisoners in the Maze. The ECHR was seen as a possible vehicle for the British government to reach a settlement on the issue while saving face. The GOC and Chief Constable had told the Secretary of State that they would not expect the UDR and the RUC, two bodies representative of Protestant opinion, to react adversely to movement forward under the ECHR procedure.<sup>215</sup> For this reason, the Secretary of State believed it was essential to handle the involvement of the ECHR in Northern Ireland prison issues as one of the many strands used to present the Government's position, particularly in the weeks leading up to the next series of hunger strike deaths.<sup>216</sup> They argued that the best course of action would be to respond positively to a role for the ECHR, as it would have the benefits of portraying the government as being proactive in the search for a solution. This in turn would help to improve its image with Northern Ireland Catholics, and maintain good relations with an important international organization.<sup>217</sup> The British also reported that within the Republic both the Government and the Opposition believed that this international body could produce a solution, though they were vague about details.<sup>218</sup>

However, though some in the British Government felt that action through the ECHR would be a good avenue to pursue, the Prime Minister had expressed no wish to see the government involved in the "friendly settlement" procedure through the ECHR. One draft of the statement to be given to the ECHR had included a willingness to consider proposals put forward by the other part, in this case the IRA, on the condition

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<sup>215</sup>Boys Smith S W. "Letter to Clive Whitmore, 'Northern Ireland: The Protestant Community' 26 May, 1981", PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew, Paragraph 5

<sup>216</sup>Boys Smith SW "Letter to Michael Alexander - Prison Protests in Northern Ireland and the European Commission on Human Rights" May 28, 1981, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Boys Smith SW. "Letter to Clive Whitmore"

that British principles were upheld. Upon reviewing the draft the Prime Minister had underlined this statement and hand-written the words, “No, No, No!”<sup>219</sup> While the Prime Minister was prepared to see the Commission carry out its duties, she was not prepared to appear to be seen to be negotiating about prison conditions through the ECHR. She felt that this impression would be particularly damaging in the aftermath of her visit to Belfast.<sup>220</sup> The continuation of a firm hard line stance was perceived to be essential.

Another major international body that the Irish government in particular had put its faith in was the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP). The Commission was the permanent secretariat of the Catholic Irish Bishop's Conference that was set up in 1970 to consider issues concerned with Peace, Human Rights, Development and Justice. It was seen as an impartial body that had both the trust of the British government and the nationalist community and that had stepped forward as being willing to help broker a solution. It had been involved in the prison protests since before the first hunger strike in 1980. It, like the ECHR, approached the conflict from a humanitarian angle. In keeping with the Church's teaching on the “dignity of human life” they both condemned the acts of violence committed by the prisoners, while at the same time criticizing the British government's “inflexible approach” that had led to the deplorable conditions within the prisons.<sup>221</sup> While the ICJP “did not support political status, it was anxious to facilitate the bringing together of the two ‘sides’ in the spirit of justice and peace, and it called the Government to consider its recommendations as a possible way forward.”<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Boys Smith SW. “Letter to Michael Alexander”

<sup>220</sup> Alexander, Michael. “Letter to SW Boys Smith ‘Prison Protest in Northern Ireland and the European Commission on Human Rights’ 29 May, 1981 PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>221</sup> Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, “Statement on H-Block”, 27 August, 1980, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>222</sup> Wright, JM, “Note for the Record: Meeting with the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace – Tuesday 23 June 1981”, 24 June, 1981, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew. 1

The ICJP had been in discussions with both the protesting prisoners and representatives from the Northern Ireland Office. The proposed settlement they had drawn up suggested that the prisoners in the Maze be allowed to wear their own clothes at all times, enjoy increased opportunities for association (while making it clear that military training would not be tolerated), and that prison work should be reviewed to include activities with cultural and educational value.<sup>223</sup> They felt that if these reforms were granted uniformly throughout the prison system in Northern Ireland, it would both satisfy some of the demands for improved conditions of the prisoners while at the same time allowing the government to stand by its principle of not granting political status.

The ICJP met with the prisoners, who demanded written proof that the proposals it outlined were guaranteed if they ended the strike. The following day, July 4, the prisoners released a conciliatory statement without the approval of Sinn Féin or the Army Council.<sup>224</sup> The timing of the statement came as a surprise to senior IRA leaders, though intelligence suggested that its substance represented a line that had previously been agreed upon by the prisoners and the leadership outside.<sup>225</sup> In breaking with the IRA leadership outside of the prison the prisoners were making the opening move in a new round of the negotiation game. The British Government took this statement as a signal that the prisoners would be willing to take a conciliatory stance and compromise. Particularly encouraging was the statement by the prisoners that they were not seeking special treatment and that the five demands could be granted without any sacrifice of

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<sup>223</sup> Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, "Statement on Hunger Strike in the Maze Prison Northern Ireland", June 3, 1981, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, Belfast, 3

<sup>224</sup> The republican prisoners in Long Kesh, "July 4 Statement", in Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown, and Felim O'Hagan *Nor Meekly Serve my Time* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 1994) 196

<sup>225</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Call no.1 2200-2312, 4 July" 1981 PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew.



principle on the British side.<sup>226</sup> The prisoners further said that they believed granting the five demands to all prisoners “would not in any way mean that the administration would be forfeiting control of the prison, nor would their say on prison activities be greatly diminished...”<sup>227</sup> This seemed to indicate that there would be a path forward towards a state of compromise.

Recent document releases are able to confirm that despite its public efforts to find an international mediator and its tough rhetoric about not talking with terrorists, the British Government was engaged in parallel and secret negotiations with the IRA. The government engaged with these contacts despite having publicly supported the mediation efforts that were simultaneously being undertaken by the ICJP. After the release of the prisoners’ statement on July 4, the British Government re-activated the secret channel used in the first hunger strike and embarked on top-secret negotiations directly with the republican leadership. The secret channel went through M16 Officer, Michael Oatley, as well as a contact that was later revealed to be Derry businessman, Brendan Duddy. The latter kept a diary of the negotiations, which has now been corroborated by the release of previously classified government documents and telephone transcripts. The channel was known among the republicans as “the Mountain Climber”, however in British Government transcripts of the phone conversations he was referred to as “Soon”. During in the messages sent between the two sides, the British Government was code-named “the management”, the Republican leadership was called “the shop stewards”, and the prisoners were referred to as “the workers”.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> *ibid.* 196

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.* 197

<sup>228</sup> Richard O’Rawe, *Blanketmen*, 174. This claim is consistent with the terminology used in Brendan Duddy’s diary.

On July 5, 1981 the first of a series of telephone calls took place to begin to reach a settlement. The first issue that was discussed was the one considered most symbolically important to the prisoners: that of the prison uniform. According to the government transcript of the conversation, “The issue of clothing would be the one area where testing of HMG’s [Her Majesty’s Government’s] intentions would take place.”<sup>229</sup> Not only did the prison uniform represent “the badge of criminality”, but it was also the sticking point that had brought down previous compromise efforts: the decision to offer “civilian-type” clothing rather than the prisoners’ own clothes had thwarted attempts to avoid the first hunger strike and the reluctance of prison authorities to distribute the prisoners’ clothes had been the downfall of the attempted settlement at the end of that hunger strike. However, the government repeatedly stressed the point that the hunger strike must be called off before any action could be expected on their end. For their part, the IRA insisted that when action was taken the hunger strikers were not given special treatment. Since it was agreed that the strikers were representatives for all the prisoners, any change must be uniformly applied.<sup>230</sup>

During this call it came up that one of the major difficulties in implementing the agreement at the end of the first hunger strike had been the attitude of some of the prison officers. The IRA said that it believed that the British Government had been sincere, but a breakdown occurred because the prisoner officers harassed some prisoners. The IRA requested that the British Government’s proposals should include instructions to the governor of the prison to be flexible when implementing the document.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “Call no.1 2200-2312, 4 July” 1981, PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>230</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, “Call no. 2 – 0230-0500, 5 July” 1981, PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew.

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*

In the next phone call, Duddy said that the Republicans were rapidly regrouping and they would meet with him between 1200 and 1500 that afternoon.<sup>232</sup> They wanted a senior member of the republican leadership to be granted permission to enter the prison and meet with the prisoners to discuss the possibility of a deal and assess their position. The republicans would compare the statement made by the secretary of state with the prisoners' statement in order to find common ground, paying close attention to detail. The number of senior members of the Republican leadership with a full grasp of the situation, including knowledge of the secret channel, was limited. The key to accepting agreement was persuasion, education and knowledge, and the problem was that only figures at the very upper echelons of the IRA and Sinn Féin leadership fit this description. The three proposed candidates were Danny Morrison, the Public Relations Officer for Provisional Sinn Féin and two high-ranking IRA members, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams. The British Government agreed to allow Morrison inside the prison but under no circumstances allow Adams or McGuinness inside.<sup>233</sup>

Although it had been originally rumored that Morrison might be in the United States, he was quickly located and he agreed to visit the prison.<sup>234</sup> The republicans stressed that it was important that it should be as quickly as possible and that it was essential that Morrison see MacFarlane and the hunger strikers.<sup>235</sup> The Government agreed but stipulated that Morrison could not see both MacFarlane and the strikers at the same time. Duddy then indicated that McGuinness had just arrived. After Morrison

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<sup>232</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Call no. 3 – 1045-1125, 5 July" 1981, PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew  
<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Call no. 4 – 1400-1405, July 5" 1981, PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

returned from the jail, Duddy would contact the British Government with the prisoners' position so that it could draft a document to be consulted on by ministers.<sup>236</sup>

On the fifth call through the channel, Duddy said that he believed he had persuaded IRA that the British Government was not interested in a settlement unless hunger strike called off first. He suggested that the IRA be allowed to see the statement before it was published, possibly best achieved at a meeting between the two ends of the channel. Soon told the British Government, "Given the provisionals' [the IRA/Sinn Féin's] wariness of HMG [Her Majesty's Government's] position, even trivial setbacks could result in major disasters."<sup>237</sup>

This message relayed through the channel after Morrison returned from the Maze brought alarming reports from his visit with the prisoners.<sup>238</sup> The prisoners were hostile to the ICJP proposals and were "every type of neurosis imaginable was surfacing within the provisionals leadership."<sup>239</sup> The republican leaders thought that the prisoners' statement had totally ignored by the ICJP, thought that the channel had be a front by the British Government to enable the ICJP to maneuver the prisoners into an "impossible position".<sup>240</sup>

On the morning of July 6, the Republican leadership sent a message through the channel. "The provisionals fully accept the position as stated by the prisoners and that is the only basis for a successful draft proposal by HMG. When HMG produced a draft, it was essential, that a copy be in the provisionals' hands before it was published."<sup>241</sup> The

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<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Call no. 7 – 2300-2400, 5 July" 1981, PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*

British Government reply, given at 11:30 PM that night, said that it was prepared to issue a statement only if there is an immediate end to the hunger strike. The deal that was given to the prisoners stipulated that:

1. The prison regime in Armagh [The women's prison in Northern Ireland] would become general in Northern Ireland prisons (i.e. own clothes subject to approval) [handwritten note "of the prison governor"]
2. Parcels, visits, and letters would be made available on the same basis as for conforming prisoners at present.
3. Remission as stated on June 30<sup>th</sup> by Secretary of State, Humphrey Atkins
4. On work – prison administration must maintain the right to decide what work should be done. Within that rule, further kinds of work are added from time to time, i.e. Open University
5. Little advance is possible on Association as laid out on June statement of the Secretary of State<sup>242</sup>

According to Richard O'Rawe, Public Relations Officer for the prisoners at the time, the proposals for the government deal were received well by the prisoners. "The British had gone further than I had considered possible: I felt it was almost too good to be true. I asked myself how the British government would sell this in Westminster. But that was hardly our problem: the proposals were there in black and white, direct from Thatcher's desk."<sup>243</sup> According to O'Rawe, he and prisoner OC Bik MacFarlane were in agreement that these proposals were sufficient for the prisoners to end the dispute honourable. "As I saw it, the offer from the Mountain Climber had reduced the gap between his bottom line and our maximum demands to the point where it wasn't then worth more comrades dying."<sup>244</sup> However, the final decision to accept the deal had to be approved by the Army Council (the IRA leadership on the outside).

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<sup>242</sup> Prime Minister's Office, "Message to be sent through channel, 6 July, 1981" PREM/19/506 confirms the first three points, but includes illegible hand written notes on matters of work and association. The notes of this phone call taken by Brendan Duddy in *The Red Book*, National University of Ireland Galway, provide insight into what these proposals were.

<sup>243</sup> Richard O'Rawe, *Blanketmen: The Untold Story of the H-Block Hunger Strike*, (Dublin: New Island, 2005) 180

<sup>244</sup> *ibid.* 180

The British wanted the proposals relayed to the IRA and required a “satisfactory reply” by 9:00 AM the next morning, at which time they would issue a full text of the statement.<sup>245</sup> If the reply was negative, including if it was silent, or if any public mention of the exchange were made the British would deny it ever took place.<sup>246</sup>

However, unlike the prisoners, the Army Council did not accept the proposals entirely. The reply that they send back through the channel said that, “To assist us in taking...a decision on your proposals, elaboration on Point C – remission, point d – work, and point e – association is necessary.”<sup>247</sup> From the Republican perspective, these were major points of contention which need to be resolved if the prison protests are to be permanently ended. The Republicans said that when this phase of negotiations was initiated they had been informed:

1. That you [the British Government] sought agreement on a document which would have our endorsement
2. That you [the British Government] sought agreement on a mutual public position
3. That your [The British Government’s] interest centered on the prisoners’ statement of July 4<sup>248</sup>

In this statement the prisoners had outlined their definition of work as “self-education and self-maintenance of the cells, wings, and blocks.”<sup>249</sup> The prisoners’ position on association was that there would be freedom of movement within the wings. On remission, the prisoners’ had outlined that ending the protests should lead to restoration of full remission. Finally, the prisoners welcomed the granting of the five demands to all prisoners, so the British could make changes without a sacrifice of principle.

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<sup>245</sup> Whitmore, Clive, “Letter to Stephen Boys-Smith, 8 July, 1981”, PREM 19/506, National Archives, Kew  
<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Duddy, *The Red Book*, Transcript made on March 2001, NUI Galway

<sup>248</sup> Duddy, *The Red Book*, “2 Note 7:50 PM”

<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*

At this point the Duddy papers say, “Mags cannot move...This response amounts to a rejection. We [meaning the British Government] are appalled by this decision.”<sup>250</sup> With that unsatisfactory exchange, according to British documents, “That particular channel of activity is therefore now no longer active.”<sup>251</sup> Shortly before 5 AM in July 7, 1981, Joe McDonnell died, as did the prospects of reaching a deal through the secret negotiations. The British Government ended its communications through the Duddy channel and the direct negotiations with the republican leadership. Duddy recorded in his diary that “the management cannot contemplate the proposal for the 2 documents” that had been set out in the last communication by the republicans and “now therefore the exchange on this channel to be ended.”<sup>252</sup>

In the negotiations exhibited behavior that was consistent with the predictions of the game theory matrix. Although they had reached the mutually beneficial state of compromise (3,3), this was an unstable state. Both sides had incentives to change their move from a conciliatory stance to a hard-line one in order to maximize their payoff. This is why the republican leadership insisted that it try to push the British Government further and try to achieve all of the five demands, rather than settling for partial concessions. It is also the reason why the British Government was quick to depart from the compromise and resume its tough hard-line stance on not conceding to the prisoners’ demands and, in ending the negotiations, effectively end the game. For the British, the move from a compromise state of (3,3) to a hard line state in which they forced the IRA to capitulate (2,4) would provide a better payoff. Desire by both sides to maximize their political position ended up causing the negotiations to breakdown entirely.

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<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>251</sup> Whitmore, “Letter to Stephen Boys-Smith, 8 July, 1981”, 1

<sup>252</sup> Duddy, *The Red Book*, “First 07/07/1981”

### 6.5: The Drawn Out Ending

The delegates to of the ICJP were also made aware of the fact that secret talks had taken place. For them, this constituted a sobering realization that their attempts to broker a settlement had been in vain. The hunger strikers released a statement rejecting the proposals of the ICJP, which itself withdrew from any further attempts to find a settlement. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July the ICJP issued a statement that set out the discussions that had with the Minister of State at the NIO, Michael Allison, and their attempts to reach a settlement. The ICJP accused the British Government of “clawing back” from the agreement. The leader of the ICJP, Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin, Dermot O’Mahoney said, “We don’t regard this as a serious attempt to seek a resolution.”<sup>253</sup> Another member of the delegation, Jerome Connally, said that “if any action is to succeed, the cloud of suspicion must be lifted...this can be done if the British Government sends in officials to the prisoners to clarify for them the Government's position on prison reform and to discuss its implementation.”<sup>254</sup>

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, a press release “from the PRO-H Blocks” asked the International Committee of the Red Cross, which had been starting to begin its own action on the hunger strike, to withdraw and called on Britain “to initiate direct negotiations with the prisoners on achieving a settlement of our demands.” In response to this, the Secretary of State issued a re-statement of the Government’s public position. On July 19, the OC of the prisoners, Bik McFarlane, asked to see the Governor of the prisoner. He said that unless a Government official was prepared to negotiate there was no point in sending anyone (a representative for the Northern Ireland Office) in to

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<sup>253</sup> Barbara Slavin and Milt Freudenheim, “Ulster Mediation Almost Succeeds”, *New York Times*, 12 July, 1981

<sup>254</sup> UPI, “Roman Catholics End Mediation Effort in Ulster”, *New York Times*, 12 July, 1981



clarify.<sup>255</sup> At about 19.00 hours on July 20, the Secretary of State gave instruction that the secret channel should be entirely closed.<sup>256</sup> The British claimed that the use of this channel had been to ensure that the IRA had “been left in no doubt that our public statements are our true position, and not a negotiating gambit.”<sup>257</sup> It had also served as a source of additional intelligence about the attitude of the IRA that the British could not have gotten in any other way.

After the death of Joe McDonnell and the failure of the secret negotiations, which also brought down the possibility of a settlement through the ICJP, the two sides seemed to have reached an impasse. Both the IRA and the British Government had allowed themselves to become entrenched in the hard line position they had taken. Classical game theory would say that this was an irrational move on the part of the IRA; by maintaining their hard line position on the five demands it was choosing to remain in its worst state of (1,2). However at this point in the story the rationality of the prisoners and the IRA leadership had to be reinterpreted in terms of what the hunger strike was meant to achieve. Some say it was no longer simply about achieving the five demands, but rather about a broader political objective.

Former prisoners have described this time as one of internal conflict about where the strike was going. The main question was, “What was to be gained by one more death?” For some prisoners, it was agreed that if the British had not moved after the deaths of four prisoners, it was unlikely that they were ever going to move. Richard O’Rawe says that he felt as though after Joe McDonnell’s death the prisoners had crossed

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<sup>255</sup> Boys-Smith, SW. “Letter to Michael Alexander ‘The Maze Hunger Strike’, 21 July, 1981,” PREM/19/506, National Archives, Kew, 2

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.* 1

<sup>257</sup> *ibid.* 1

a Rubicon that they had promised not to cross. In his view, the prisoners' hard-line stance of "no compromise" on the five demands was a euphemism for "no strategy".<sup>258</sup> With no indication that the British Government would ever concede to the threat power of the prisoners' hunger strike, there was confusion on just how many deaths would have to occur before the strike was eventually called off.

Brendan Hughes, the leader of the first hunger strike, believed that the Republican leadership at this point had the power to end the strike and did not. From his point of view the leadership on the outside kept the strike going for reasons that were "purely political."<sup>259</sup>

"I believe that was the reason why the leadership on the outside did not intervene, because of the street protests that were taking place, because of the political party that Sinn Fein (sic.) was building. I think that was [the] outside's foremost priority – it wasn't the five demands, I don't believe it was the five demands."<sup>260</sup>

Another prisoner, Séanna Walsh, said that he himself withdrew his name from the list of volunteers for hunger strike at this point because he believed they would no longer be dying for political status, but in order to not invalidate the sacrifices made by their comrades.<sup>261</sup> He described a feeling of snowballing pressure that had grown and grown as they had tried everything in their power to move the British, but now that snowball was rolling back at the prisoners as it became their responsibility to end the hunger strike.

Indeed, the historical records show that the British Government was not deterred from its hard line stance by the continued hunger strike, even as external pressure seemed to increase. The Irish Government, which was enduring public and political unrest as a

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<sup>258</sup> O'Rawe, *Blanketmen*, 194

<sup>259</sup> Brendan Hughes interviewed in Ed Moloney, *Voices from the Grave*, 252

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Séanna Walsh interviewed in Campbell, McKeown, and O'Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, 237

result of the hunger strikes, had learned about the secret channel. They were attempting to maintain a good relationship with Britain while trying to settle this problem in which people had become so emotionally involved.<sup>262</sup> The Irish Government had heavily backed the proposals of the ICJP, and this seemed to be a treacherous move on the part of the British Government that greatly threatened British-Irish relations. The new Irish Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, tried one more diplomatic tactic in hopes of persuading the “Iron Lady” to take a more conciliatory position. He appealed to United States President, Ronald Reagan, for help. In his letter to leader of what he called, “the greatest democracy on earth”, FitzGerald wrote:

"I would ask you to use your enormous influence with the British prime minister within the next 24 hours in the interest of averting a death which would inevitably increase support for the terrorists and further undermine the stability of our democracy in a dangerous way and can only harm the interests of the British, Irish and American governments...I believe that an expression of your concern to Mrs. Thatcher of the deterioration in the state of opinion among Americans of Irish extraction and among many other Americans and of the urgent necessity to avert the consequences which would result from Mr. Doherty's death could be of decisive importance."<sup>263</sup>

This was not the first time President Reagan had been asked to press Thatcher on the hunger strikes issue. The issue was one of concern to a number of Irish-American politicians and those representing districts with a large population of the Irish diaspora. Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill had written to Reagan on June 24, 1981.<sup>264</sup> Like FitzGerald, he had appealed to the close alliance between the US and the UK, and also the fact that, given the size of the Irish-American population, there was an “American dimension” to the Irish problem. Both FitzGerald and Thatcher had long worried about the effect the strikes would have on American funding for IRA activities. However,

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<sup>262</sup> Leonard Downie Jr., “Hunger Strike Endangers Ties, Irish Tell British” *Washington Post*, 11 July, 1981

<sup>263</sup> Brian Hutton, “FitzGerald Pleaded with Reagan to Soften the Iron Lady”, *Irish Examiner*, 30 December, 2011

<sup>264</sup> O'Neill, Tip. “Letter to President Ronald Reagan, 19 May, 1981”, PREM/19/505, National Archives, Kew

although state papers show that some weeks later, more American politicians, such as Senator Ted Kennedy, requested a meeting with Reagan, this action was not successful in sufficiently persuading the British to change course and preventing the next death. The British maintained their hard-line position, and Kieran Doherty became the sixth striker to die on August 2, 1981, after 73 days without food.

The hunger strike crisis now seemed inescapable. As the death toll mounted over the course of the summer of 1981 both sides became deeper and deeper entrenched in their respective positions. The escalation of the hunger strike by the prisoners meant that the final four deaths of Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Tomas McElwee, and Mickey Divine came in quick succession from the end of July through August, a draining emotional ordeal for the prisoners and their families.

**Table 2**

Name	Age	Date of Death	Days on Hunger Strike	Crime
Bobby Sands	27	May 5, 1981	66	Possession of a handgun
Francis Hughes	25	May 12, 1981	59	Various offences including murder of a soldier
Raymond McCreesh	24	May, 21, 1981	61	Attempted murder, possession of a rifle, IRA membership
Patsy O'Hara	24	May 21, 1981	61	Possession of a hand grenade
Joe McDonnell	30	July 7, 1981	61	Possession of a firearm
Martin Hurson	24	July 13, 1981	46	Attempted murder, involvement in explosions, IRA membership
Kevin Lynch	25	August 1, 1981	71	Stealing shotguns
Kieran Doherty	25	August 2, 1981	73	Possession of firearms and explosives, hijacking
Thomas McIlwee	23	August 8, 1981	62	Manslaughter
Micky Devine	27	August 20, 1981	60	Theft and possession of firearms

The initiative that finally ended the hunger strike came from Father Denis Faul, a Catholic priest who had been deeply involved with both the prisoners and their families. Faul became enraged at what he believed to be manipulation of the hunger strike for political gain. He had confronted the prison OC, Bik McFarlane, about this, and after the death of Martin Hurson, who was originally from Faul's parish in Tyrone, the two got into an explosive argument in which Faul accused McFarlane of being responsible for Hurson's death.<sup>265</sup> Father Faul thus made it his mission to bring an end to the hunger strike. He called a meeting of the families in a hotel north of Belfast. He informed them of their legal right to intervene when their sons were declared "unfit to make a decision." Though some families were reticent to interfere with their sons' wishes, the mother of hunger striker Paddy Quinn became the first to intervene.<sup>266</sup> After this initial action, more and more families began taking their sons off the strike when their sons reached the critical point. After a number of interventions the prison OC, Bik McFarlane, had discussions with the hunger strikers about the situation. He also made an assessment of how many of the families and discovered that quite a number were going to intervene, regardless of the wishes of the hunger strikers.

"I met with everyone on hunger strike and painted the scenario for them, what the situation was and they agreed that if the next 3 or 4 families intervened, then one after that didn't intervene we were in a situation where someone would die just to prove that we could die and that's not what the whole thing was about. So it was decided that we needed to end it and that we would be in control of ending it."<sup>267</sup>

Having reached the point where the hunger strike had become unsustainable, the strike was officially declared to be over on October 4, 1981. The prisoners released a statement in which they said, "We have been robbed of the hunger strike as an effective

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<sup>265</sup> Bik McFarlane, interviewed in Campbell, McKeown, and O'Hagan, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, 224

<sup>266</sup> O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 279

<sup>267</sup> Bik McFarlane, interviewed in Laurence McKeown, *Out of Time*, 79

protest weapon principally because of the successful campaign waged against our distressed relatives by the Catholic hierarchy.”<sup>268</sup> The crisis had finally been brought to an end.

### Chapter 7: Conclusion

The conventional narrative put forward at the present day, 30 years later, is that the election of Bobby Sands and two other prisoner candidates during the hunger strike is that this taught the IRA the benefits of electoral politics and that marked a shift for them away from their armed struggle. However, at the time, the benefits of contesting elections were not apparent to the prisoners. The statement released by the prisoners at the end of the strike reveals that they were discouraged and felt that, if anything, the outcome of the strikes reinforced their thinking that any Catholic nationalist or republican electoral success was inconsequential within the political system of Northern Ireland at the time. As they said in their statement, “Despite the electoral successes and its implications, despite the 100,000 mourners who attended Bobby Sands’ funeral, despite the massive and unprecedented display of community support, the British Government adhered strictly to the precept that ‘might is right’...”<sup>269</sup> This analysis led them to conclude that, “nationalist pacifism in the Northern Ireland context dooms the nationalist population to subserviency (sic.), perpetuates partition, and thwarts the quest for a just and lasting peace in Ireland.”<sup>270</sup>

Just who won in the battle of the 1980-81 hunger strikes is up for interpretation. In the immediate aftermath of the strikes, the British Government declared victory. They

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<sup>268</sup> “Statement from republican POWs, H-Blocks, 30 September, 1981”, Linen Hall Library Political Collection, H-Block/Hunger Strike Box 5, Belfast

<sup>269</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *ibid.*

had stood firm on their stance against political status and eventually forced the prisoners to end the strikes. However, within three years the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Prior, instituted reforms in the prison system that gave the prisoners all of the five demands. These changes came in a very short time. Within three days of the end of the hunger strike, Prior announced that all prisoners in Northern Ireland would be allowed to wear their own clothes, thus removing the “badge of criminality” that had been the symbolic beginning of the blanket protest, the dirty protest, and finally the hunger strikes.<sup>271</sup> Following this came more concessions on association, remission, and prison work. The cruel irony of this was that if were this concession to have been made a year before, the hunger strikes could have easily been avoided. Although the British Government had not caved under the duress of the strikes, they recognized due to the magnitude of the fallout, that it was absolutely necessary to make these changes to the prison system in order to prevent future prison crises.

In the political realm, the rise of Sinn Féin altered the electoral landscape immensely, and also meant that solely internal solutions proved ever less likely to solve the Northern problem. The electoral mobilization of militant republicanism completely changed the political calculus for both the British and the Irish governments. After the election of Bobby Sands, Sinn Féin not only contested elections in Northern Ireland, where it was perceived by a threat not only to unionists, but also to moderate nationalists like the SDLP, but in the Republic as well. The success that the republican movement had mobilizing voters during the hunger strikes was not a passing phenomenon. In the by-election for the seat won by Bobby Sands, the republican supporter Owen Carron won by an even larger margin than Sands had. In the British General election of 1983, Sinn

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<sup>271</sup> Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 332

Féin captured 43% of the nationalist vote and 15% of the general vote. This was alarming to the two sovereign governments particularly when compared to the 18% of the general vote that had been won by the moderate nationalist party, SDLP.<sup>272</sup> Fears began to arise that this type of electoral success would make Sinn Féin the legitimate voice of the nationalist population in the North, which would in turn make the impression that most Catholics supported the armed struggle and militant republicanism. The rise of Sinn Féin as a political force was thus perceived to be a threat to moderate Irish nationalism and possible an inhibiting factor to the peace process.

This fear spurred on political developments such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was seen as a first crucial step forward in terms of bilateral management of the Northern Ireland conflict. The hunger strikes have been credited with giving the Northern Ireland problem a sense of urgency that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which has since been seen as a critical step towards the Good Friday Agreement that was signed in 1998, which brought about a power-sharing government.<sup>273</sup> Yet whether or not this represents a success of the hunger strike is dependent on how one defines the political goals of the hunger strikers and the Republican movement. Some, like Gerry Adams, who makes clear in his memoirs that he considered developing the political influence of Sinn Féin to be a top priority, contends that the strikes were successful in that they gave republicans both experience and a groundswell of support that made them an effective political organization.<sup>274</sup> Still others who opposed the peace process view the power-sharing arrangement as a sell out and a betrayal of the prisoners and the ideals of

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<sup>272</sup> O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, 221

<sup>273</sup> The connection between the hunger strikes and the Anglo-Irish Agreement is a common thread throughout the literature written about the strikes. See David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, 332; Liam Clarke, *Broadening the Battlefield*, 222-225, and Padraig O'Malley, 222-226

<sup>274</sup> Adams, *Before the Dawn*, 315-317



republicanism. To these observers, the strikers died because they viewed the prison fight for a united Ireland, not for a power-sharing government that some contend destroys the hope of this mission being realized.<sup>275</sup>

Given this historical trajectory, it is clear that viewing the hunger strikes as a political event, rather than cultural phenomenon, is crucial because of the implications that it has the future possibilities of Northern Ireland. If the hunger strikes were, as O'Malley and other authors have suggested, a symptom of a defective culture then the political developments that have taken place in the wake of the hunger strikes would not have been possible. Followed to its logical conclusion, "the politics of despair", as O'Malley has called the situation that led to the tragedy, would only be rectified when there were profound shifts in the culture of Irish nationalism. Since culture is neither quick nor easy to change, this leaves a very pessimistic view of the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland in the wake of the hunger strikes. However, if the root of the conflict in the hunger strikes is *political* as I have argued in this thesis, then there is a way forward through the reformation of political structures and successive attempts at political bargaining which have eventually given rise to a compromise solution. Herein lies the importance of redefining the hunger strikes as a political action: to dismiss these strikers and the organization that they represented as irrational byproducts of cultural brainwashing is to misunderstand their behavior and political goals. It is only through such an understanding that a path forward can be forged, and a mutually beneficial outcome to this conflict to be realized.

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<sup>275</sup> Brendan Hughes interviewed in Ed Moloney, *Voices from the Grave*, 292-293. For more examples of opinions expressed by dissident republicans see also the writings of Anthony McIntyre. In particular, his online magazine *The Blanket* which provides a variety of work by leading republicans, many of whom are critical of the peace process: <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/>

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