

**THE IRA, SINN FEIN, AND THE HUNGER STRIKE
OF 1981**

Michael von Tangen Page

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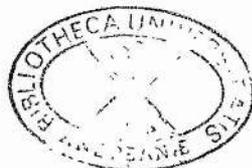
THE IRA, SINN FEIN, AND THE
HUNGER STRIKE OF 1981.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the 1981 hunger strike by republican prisoners in Northern Ireland against the removal of special category status from newly convicted paramilitary prisoners on 1 March 1976, the fast was part of a protest that began in 1976.

The thesis opens with an examination of the origins of the Provisional Irish Republican Army in 1969 and the emergence of a younger leadership in the late 1970's, and evaluates the significance of the prisons in Irish history. The development of the prisoners protests ranging from the refusal to put on a uniform and perform prison work to the rejection of sanitary or washing facilities, is analysed. The prisoners demands are examined in the context of British and international law. The campaign in support of the republican prisoners conducted outside the Maze Prison, including the formation of the Relatives Action Committee and the National H-Block/Armagh Committee is surveyed, and the female "dirty" protest at Armagh Prison is examined. The medical, ethical, and moral dilemmas presented by hunger striking are identified and the thesis examines the debate whether the men who died were suicides or martyrs. The 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes are examined with particular attention to the efforts to bring about a compromise with the British government and the factors leading to a new hunger strike in 1981 and to the intervention of the Catholic Church with the prisoners relatives which ended the fast. The hunger strike is

analysed regarding its effect internationally in building up republican support, and in the Province where it acted as the base for the future success of Provisional Sinn Fein later in the decade.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1a. INTRODUCTION.

The origin of the Prison dispute of 1976 to 1981 can arguably lie at any time in the last 800 years from when the Normans first invaded Ireland to the present conflict. Normally, the choice reveals the political bias of the writer.

In Chapter II, the historical background to the dispute will be examined in more detail. It will include a consideration of the background to the emergence of the Provisionals in the late 1960's after a split had occurred in the old Irish Republican Army (IRA). The power struggle that provided the leadership that was to rise to public profile during the hunger strike is also examined.¹ It will also look at the long history of Irish republicans' refusal to accept the status of a criminal. Practically every move made during the prison crisis was based on precedents set by the Republicans in gaols in Britain and Ireland over the last two centuries. Traditionally prisoners have refused to do prison work, wear any form of convict uniform, take prison cooked food, or have anything to do with ordinary criminals (ODC's in prison argot meaning Ordinary Decent Criminals). They have also demanded the right to their

¹ Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, THE H-BLOCKS AND THE RISE OF SINN FEIN**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 45-47.

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own structures of command with the authorities working through the structure.²

The immediate cause for the crises, as examined in Chapter III, lies in an announcement made by Merlyn Rees in February 1976 to Westminster. In this speech he argued that as internment had been ended, he intended to follow the guide-lines of the report which was compiled by the judge Lord Gardiner and published in 1975.³ This report argued that the authorities had lost control of the prison compounds and that the prisons were not fulfilling their role as a reforming institution. In fact it was the opposite situation within the compounds. The people inside the cages sited in Long Kesh seemed to think that an amnesty would soon be announced and that the sentences of the courts for serious offences were losing their deterrent effect. The newly built cell based prison built on the Long Kesh site, but named the Maze Prison (after the local village famed as the sight of Northern Ireland's horse racing track), was due to be opened, and presented an ideal situation for the end of special category status.⁴

Though the reforms were to also include dramatically improved remission of sentences, the government should have expected some form of resistance. The new prison regime which was dubbed by republicans as

2 Tim Pat Coogan, *DISILLUSIONED DECADES, IRELAND 1966-87*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 222-228.

3 HANSARD, 20 February 1976, coll 1077.

4 Lord Gardiner (chair), *REPORT OF A COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER, IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS, MEASURES TO DEAL WITH TERRORISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND*. London: Her Majesties Stationary Office, 1975, 33-34.

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"criminalisation" came into effect in regard to crimes committed after the 1 March 1976. This was fought by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), and its legal political wing Provisional Sinn Fein (PSF) for several reasons. Partly this was seen as a direct attack on their status as political prisoners, but they also viewed the prison policy as part of a greater policy which they dubbed "normalisation". The British authorities called it "Ulsterisation". This included reducing the role of the Army in directly fighting the Provisionals, by introducing the policy of police primacy and increasing the role of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). This led to a reduction in the number of British troops on the streets of Ulster⁵, and reduced the number of British casualties. "Ulsterisation" also signalled a localisation of the conflict and so illustrated that the British were preparing for a long term presence in the Province, thus unintentionally mirroring the increased role of the northerners in the Provisionals. The war on both sides now was largely an internal Ulster affair. This was not something that the Provisionals would have wanted as it would have conflicted with their own perception of the troubles. As "criminalisation" was something they could easily fight it became the obvious target with which to fight the whole "Ulsterisation" strategy.

The protest developed from the original refusal to wear convict's uniform. This was first the "blanket" protest, then the "no-work" protest followed by the

⁵ Chris Ryder, *THE RUC, A FORCE UNDER FIRE*, London: Mandarin, 1990, 140.

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"dirty" protest when the prisoners smashed all the furniture in their cells and refused to use the toilet facilities, choosing instead to foul the walls. This, together with a refusal to cooperate with the prison warders, meant that the protesting prisoners were living in appalling (though self inflicted conditions). One also can see the formulation of the prisoners aims in what became known as the five demands which amounted to a reintroduction of special category status. These were:

1. The right to wear their own clothes.
2. The right to abstain from penal labour.
3. The right to free association.
4. The right to educational and recreational activities.
5. The restoration of all remission lost because of the prison protest.⁶

Outside the prison there were two parallel campaigns in support of the protesters. This is examined in Chapter IV. Firstly the PIRA were conducting an assassination campaign against people working within the prison system. The aims of this campaign were twofold, to try and frighten people off from working as prison officers, and an attempt to get prison officers to attack the prisoners physically to aid the outside prison campaign. It was also an attempt by the Southern leadership to show the prisoners that their protest was not being ignored and thus maintain morale within the prison. At this stage the power-struggle within the Provisionals was heightening, and the prisons were known to be sympathetic to the more

6 Coogan, (1987), 229-230.

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politicised northerners who preferred to use the political card. These people included: Gerry Adams, Danny Morrison, and Martin McGuinness outside the gaols; Brendan Hughes, Bobby Sands, and Mairead Farrell inside the prisons.⁷ The external campaign was not a purely Provisional operation, though PSF dominated proceedings. Several diverse groups were to form a series of Anti-Unionist coalitions over the prisons issue. These groups included: the Relatives Action Committee (RAC), the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) which was the political wing of the INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), the remains of the Nationalist Party, Peoples Democracy (PD) and PSF.⁸ This was the first workable coalition that the Provisionals had set up, but the most important party among Catholics, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), was not in attendance, as PSF was only prepared to co-operate with organisations that allowed it to be in full control. Indeed past attempts at coalition had fallen through when PSF complained of SDLP infiltration. These groups eventually formed what became known as the National H-Block/Armagh Committee at a conference at the Green Briar Hotel in Belfast. The Committee co-ordinated a national and international campaign in support of the "blanketmen". During the 1980 hunger strike the committee released leaflets publicising the strikers aims and publishing the five demands. The issue of the prisoners

7 Edgar O'Ballance, *IRA LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS*, Paul Wilkinson (ed), *BRITISH PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 79, & Tim Pat Coogan, *ON THE BLANKET, THE H-BLOCK STORY*, Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 115 & Coogan, (1987), 230-232.

8 David Reed, *IRELAND: THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION*, London: Larkin Publications, 1984, 319.

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was essentially portrayed as one of human rights.⁹ The argument was that the prisoners were political offenders because their offence was politically motivated- with PIRA members being people who would not in a normal society be violent criminals- and so should be regarded as political offenders. The other argument was that the prisoners were POW's and should be treated as such under the terms of the Geneva Convention. This campaign was only partly successful and by 1980 a hunger strike looked a near certainty.

However, the escalation to hunger strike meant that some serious medical, ethical and moral issues had to be addressed by all the actors in the prison dispute. In Chapter V these issues are discussed. The medical aspects of fasting dictated that fasts would last between on average forty-five and seventy days depending on the physical condition of the individual hunger striker. The human body tries to minimise the damage caused by the deprivation of food by reducing the size of most glands and muscles, slowing the metabolism and curtailing voluntary movements. However after a while the brain is permanently damaged as are the respiratory muscles, at this stage unless the person on the fast was fully fit at the start of the strike then they face an increased mortality rate.¹⁰ It is at this stage that if they are to live they have to be force fed and even if they survive the body and mind of the striker may be permanently damaged.

9 Ibid, 339-341.

10 John Macleoud (ed), DAVIDSON'S PRINCIPALS AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE, A TEXTBOOK FOR STUDENTS AND DOCTORS. Edinburgh & New York: Churchill Livingstone, 1981, 86-87.

The authorities faced the problem of whether or not to force feed the prisoners but the British had decided that they would not medically intervene without the individuals or their relatives consent after the death of Michael Gaughan in 1974. This meant that the strikers would die unless they changed their minds. Did this mean that the hunger strikers were suicides or martyrs? This was to cause some disagreement within the Catholic Church. Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich felt that one did not go on hunger strike with the intention of dying, while Bishop Daly of Derry opposed the fast as a drawn out form of suicide. After a number of deaths once it became clear that no matter how many prisoners died the Church became increasingly opposed to the fast and set out to end the strike.¹¹

By 1980, as is shown in Chapter VI, it seemed that the campaign, though successful in winning support from the nationalist community, was not going to win an improvement in prison conditions and had not moved the British government to give any concessions. The principal hope of gaining a change in government policy was the attempt by five "blanketmen" to challenge the prison conditions in the European Commission on Human Rights. In June 1980, the Commission's judgement was largely in Britain's favour. However, it did leave one small opening for compromise between the authorities and prisoners. This was that it was the duty of the government to provide acceptable conditions for the prisoners and as

11 IRISH TIMES, 2 March 1981 & TIMES, 19 June 1981.

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this was not the case in Ulster then prison conditions should be reconsidered.¹²

Another hope was a series of discussions between the NIO minister responsible for the prisons, Michael Alison, and Cardinal O'Fiaich. However these talks also failed to find a mutually acceptable solution. The prisoners would not sacrifice on three issues, namely, remission, prison work, and uniform. In fact to many republicans the five points were the maximum concession to the British. The British were unwilling to negotiate and were not prepared to sacrifice control. They preferred to offer liberal interpretations of prison rules rather than change the regime. This would have turned many of the conditions the prisoners wanted as a right into privileges. The other issue the government were not prepared to move on was a differentiation in the conditions for paramilitary prisoners and the ODC's.

By the early autumn of 1980 the two sides were irreconcilable and a hunger strike was inevitable. The seven hunger strikers embarked on the fast towards the end of October in the hope that the pressure to stop deaths at Christmas time would be increased because of the date. On the 1 December they were joined by three female hunger strikers in Armagh with the intention that this might fuel the moral indignation of the socially conservative Irish population. This was also a useful method of moral support for the men and an indication that the northern leadership were far more socially liberal than their predecessors. The pressure was

12 GUARDIAN, 20 June 1980.

increased to a further extent when a total of thirty prisoners joined the fast on the 15 and 16 December. One of the seven original hunger strikers, Sean McKenna, was badly ill by this time and by the 17 December was incapable of keeping water down and would soon die. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) released a statement the same day which was passed on to the hunger strikers with what they felt was an assurance that if they abandoned the strike and saved McKenna's life the proposals could be negotiated on. Thus, just before Christmas on the 18 December, the fast was called off.

There is some confusion as to what happened afterwards and this is examined in section (d) of Chapter IV. It seems that the prison leaders, including Brendan Hughes the hunger strike OC (Officer Commanding), were unprepared to see any deaths. The prisoners thought that the deal offered by the government was negotiable while the authorities did not. This misunderstanding led both sides to feel that the other had broken the agreement, so they were determined in 1981 not to compromise.

In an attempt to introduce the agreed reforms the authorities placed ninety-six "blanketmen" into clean furnished cells. On the 28 January the prisoners destroyed the furniture and started to foul the cell walls.¹³ The republican leadership was worried about an alarming drop in the number of prisoners on the blanket and decided that if the protest was to do anything it had to do so fast. On the 9 February 1981, the PSF office in Belfast announced that as of 1 March Robert "Bobby" Sands

13 IRISH TIMES, 10 February 1981.

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would go on strike to be followed by other prisoners at two week intervals. It was hoped that the use of a series of single hunger strikes would increase the pressure on the government. Thus, every few weeks there would be a new death approaching which meant the external campaign could use this to galvanize public support. It was also hoped that the single fasts would prevent a repeat of the panic that was caused at the end of the 1980 strike by the possibility of all seven men dying simultaneously.

The principal problem of the 1981 strike was the total communication failure between the prisoners and the authorities. As Humphrey Atkins was to state ten years later, the republicans were not prepared to accept that the government could not be seen to negotiate while the hunger strike was still on.¹⁴ As it turned out it was not the republican leadership which in the end recognised this but the relatives and the Catholic Church. As will be seen the government, from as early as 2 March, when Atkins informed Westminster of his intention not to give in to prisoners (with three party support), the British were ready to allow the men to die.

The next important issue to occur during the crisis was the by-election in the seat of Fermanagh and South Tyrone on the 9 April 1981. In this seat Sands (the only Catholic candidate) was to win an important victory in the prisoner's quest for legitimacy. This result was not only an irritation to the government, but also the vital ingredient in the republican movement's attempts to

14 *PACK UP THE TROUBLES, CRITICAL EYE*, London: Exco T.V for Channel Four, 24 October 1991.

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expand the external campaign outside of the Province, as well as launch PSF's new strategy of using democratic politics as a weapon in conjunction with the armed struggle.

After this victory there were two new attempts to provide intermediaries in an attempt to solve the dispute in April before any hunger strikers died. These were by Fr John Magee, a personal emissary of the Pope, and the European Commission for Human Rights who returned to the dispute after a request from Sands' sister (at the suggestion of the Dublin government).¹⁵ However, Sands died on the 5 May 1981. This resulted in a large amount of rioting in nationalist areas leading to the death of three people and a resultant increase in sectarian tension.¹⁶ Throughout the summer both sides became further entrenched as the number of deaths mounted up.

By September arguments by British Catholics that the hunger strikers were suicides were beginning to gain ground even among republican minded clerics in the North. This led a prison chaplain, Fr Dennis Faul, to decide that he should end the strike. The best way to do this was through the relatives who were by now increasingly disillusioned with the Provisional's leadership of the fast. In a meeting the relatives decided to announce that it was their intention to intervene when the strikers went into coma. This broke the fast which ended after ten strikers deaths on the 3 October 1981.¹⁷

15 GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

16 IRISH TIMES, 14 May 1981.

17 GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

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Originally the Provisionals had hoped that the hunger strike might have been the push that they needed for their electoral strategy but they did not succeed in winning new support. Their supporters simply voted for the first time, having previously not bothered. The SDLP vote did not go down despite the rise in PSF votes. Further, the republican vote has since declined and has never been able to reach the support that the H-Block candidates had in 1981 in the by-elections. Those votes were single issue votes, not declarations of support for the Provisionals or the armed struggle. Internationally the effect of the hunger strike was useful in advancing propaganda and the resultant monies this brought in. The dispute and the strike allowed the Provisionals and their allies world wide to take their message and compromise the British. They were able to portray the British as inflexible and intolerant with the prisoners' rights being claimed as human rights. By extension they were able to then question the continuation of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom (UK). This was done throughout the European Economic Community (EEC), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Commonwealth, much to the consternation of the Foreign Office.

Within the UK and Ireland the dispute sparked off a determination to try and find some form of political initiative to solve the North's problems. In the Republic the new regime under Garret FitzGerald's *Fine Gael*/Labour coalition decided to form the New Irish Forum where the constitutionalist parties in the Republic and the SDLP put forward a series of possibilities for the North.

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These were rejected by the British who in 1982 tried to re-introduce the Stormont Parliament but failed because the SDLP and PSF boycotted their seats. The SDLP did not take their seats up, as they wanted some form of Irish dimension which was not present. Then finally came the Anglo/Irish Agreement of 1986 which gave the Republic a consultative role in the North's affairs. The UK also for the first time mentioned that if the majority of the population ever voted for a reunion with the Republic then this would occur.

This was successful in halting the rise of PSF and allowed the SDLP to become secure in its position. This has led to the retaking of Gerry Adams West Belfast parliamentary seat by the SDLP. Ultimately this has meant that the legacy (of significant political support) left by the hunger strikers to the Provisionals has effectively been halted. But so long as the present conflict continues in Ireland, the prisons will continue to remain an emotive subject which republicans could exploit in the future.

1b. TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY.

In Northern Ireland even the terminology used is politically loaded. This thesis has used a variety of terms for the part of Ireland remaining within the UK. These are Northern Ireland (the official name), the Six Counties (a term preferred by republicans), Ulster (often used by unionists meaning the Six Counties not counting the three counties now in the Republic) and simply the terms the North or the Province. Similarly the Republic of Ireland (Official name Poblacht na hEireann) is also

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referred to as the Twenty-six Counties, Southern Ireland, the South or the Republic. When the term Ireland is used without any qualification the whole thirty-two counties are being referred to. In reference to the city and county of (London)derry the official name is used. So the city and county are referred to as Londonderry except when the term Derry indicates a correct usage, for example the Catholic and Church of Ireland Bishopricks use the older term of Derry as do the city council and other organisations. Similarly, when referring to the Long Kesh/Maze Prison the official name at the period referred to is used.

When references are made to other terms such as "Criminalisation" or the "Armed Struggle", they are used to reflect the perception of the actors involved in the Irish Conflict. No political meaning is intended with these and other terms, and they are used interchangeably when it is appropriate in the text. When reference is made to the republican movement the large group of organisations who support the forceful unification of Ireland ranging from PIRA to the National H-Block/Armagh Committee is being talked of. The term Provisional is used to indicate PIRA and PSF together. The term nationalist is used to indicate the largely Catholic people and organisations who support the unification of Ireland whether by force or by consent.

No political theory is used in the text for two principal reasons. Firstly, the constraints on the word limit of the M.Phil thesis has meant that there is not the space required to give this approach justice.

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However, the use of theory in a Phd would be a useful addition to the study of this period should anyone ever approach it. Secondly, the primary intention of this thesis was to give an academic overview of the large amount of material that has appeared about the prison protest in the ten years since it ended. This has meant that a principally historical narrative approach to the thesis was taken leaving the theoretical work for future studies.

The principal sources for this work came from the Press Archive in the Department of International Relations at St. Andrews University which contained a wide range of cuttings from British and international papers. The republican press also provided another important source explaining the perceptions of the principal actors in the hunger strike. A further vital source of material was the Linen Hall Library in Belfast which has a large collection of ephemera from the dispute including press releases and leaflets from all sides in the conflict. The secondary works referred to in the literature review were important because of the authors' access to figures not available to this researcher.

1c. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.

The literature on the prison protest of 1976 to 1981 has two distinctive characteristics. Firstly, it has been written from a largely pro-nationalist perspective which is to varying degrees sympathetic to the prisoners. Secondly, the vast majority of the work was written in a journalistic manner rather than from an academic perspective. These two factors have meant that much of

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the published literature highlighted human involvement and had tendency towards generalisation.

The most important work in this topic was Liam Clarke's, *Broadening The Battlefield, The H-Blocks And The Rise Of Sinn Fein*. This work, though sympathetic to the nationalist perspective of the conflict, was well researched and written.¹⁸ He approached the study of the dispute as part of the evolving political strategy of the Provisionals especially the development of Armalite politics by PSF and the northern leadership. His work on the hunger strike is largely based on the role of the fast in the development of the outside campaign. Much of the material that is verifiable proved correct and he demonstrated a sound understanding of the principal Catholic actors in the crisis whether churchmen or gunmen. His area of weakness was in his lack of satisfactory contacts amongst Protestants and the government. He also over emphasised the role of the dispute outside of the Province and its effect on British and Irish policy. It could also be argued that he placed too much importance on the strike in its long term effect on the province as well perhaps reflecting the perceptions and bias of his largely republican contacts.

The book by the former editor of the *Irish Press*, Tim Pat Coogan, on the prison dispute before the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 is an excellent source of material. *On The Blanket, The H-Block Story* is unashamedly sympathetic to the aims of the prisoners in that Coogan felt that they had a good case for special

18 Clarke, (1987).

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treatment, given the situation in the North (though Coogan has always maintained that the physical force tradition of republicanism is wrong).¹⁹ However, unlike Clarke, he had good contacts both amongst the Protestant community (whether politicians, paramilitaries or Prison and Police Officers) and the government. Sadly he is at times over optimistic about Protestant opinion, especially that of the paramilitaries in regard to their attitude to the dispute and the solution to the greater conflict. He puts a more rounded case together than Clarke, but it is incomplete as he published the book in mid-1980 and has never seen fit to update it with an account of the hunger strikes and an assessment of the effect of the fast. As his principal intention in producing the work at the time was to explain the reasons behind the protest to the wider public, so at times it tends to sound more like a pamphlet than a study.

This is unfortunate as his accounts of the strike in his history of contemporary Ireland *Disillusioned Decades, Ireland 1966-87* and the updated history of physical force republicanism, *The IRA*,²⁰ are both brief and lack the detail of *On The Blanket*.

The other important work on the hunger strike itself was the account published by the *Guardian* journalist David Beresford who covered the dispute for the newspaper. *The Book Ten Men Dead* is unashamedly sympathetic to the PIRA and their aims but this does not prevent him giving an accurate account of the strike

19 Coogan, (1980).

20 Coogan, (1987) and Tim Pat Coogan, *THE IRA*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988.

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itself.²¹ His aim was to give as near to an inside story of the dispute as was possible. He was given access to the "comms" (smuggled communications) between prisoners and the republican leadership outside the Maze and it is upon these that the book is based. He also uses his contacts to explain the negotiations between the Provisionals and the government. Unfortunately there is no way of authenticating his account of the Mountain Climber's dialogue and it is likely that the Provisionals may have misinformed him of aspects of the negotiations. This close involvement with his material has also resulted in him not giving a satisfactory account of the collapse of the fast and the estrangement between the relatives and the outside leadership. He also has a habit of over-emphasising the personal side of the conflict. This has meant that in concentrating upon the minutiae he loses the greater picture and is not very good on the 1976 to 1980 period of the dispute.

There have also been two other books directly concerning the dispute which have not been used to any great extent in the thesis because they have the deficiencies of the Beresford book without the advantages. These are *The Irish Hunger Strike* by Tom Collins,²² and *Bobby Sands And The Tragedy Of Northern Ireland* by John M Feehan.²³ The latter book is an exercise in the deification of Bobby Sands. Its

21 David Beresford, *TEN MEN DEAD*. London: Grafton Books, 1987.

22 Tom Collins, *THE IRISH HUNGER STRIKE*. Dublin & Belfast: White Island Book Company, 1986.

23 John M. Feehan, *BOBBY SANDS AND THE TRAGEDY OF NORTHERN IRELAND*. Dublin & Cork: Mercier Press, 2nd Rep, 1984.

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romanticisation of the whole fast and the participants quotes heavily from Sands' own writings in an attempt to explain his motivation. This mythologising of a man who outside the prison was a rather sad and inadequate figure detracts from the actual act of his hunger striking to the death and turns him into something he was not. It is a paltry source book to the academic as the material it contains is either available elsewhere or not worth using. Its analysis remains at the level of preaching to the converted.

Tom Collins' book is little better than Feehans': it also over romanticises the fast and its participants. The work is written in an overly familiar manner. He has an irritating habit of using first names which clouds any attempt at properly analysing the fast as all critical faculties are suspended in regard to the Provisionals' though interestingly not the INLA. As an account it is reasonably accurate, though it says nothing that is not said better elsewhere.

Apart from the above works there have been a number of books published about the conflict in the North that have devoted substantial sections to the prison crisis. Rather like the specialised works, most of these histories have taken a position which is sympathetic to the nationalist perception of Northern Ireland. This is surprising given that the British have a valid perspective on the conflict although the Protestants and the British frequently do their best to destroy their own case. This is in many ways a regrettable situation as an outside observer's position is inevitably influenced by

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any chronicler's biases, though recent publications by northerners like Martin Dillon, Chris Ryder, and David McKittrick have gone some way to addressing this problem.

The problem remains that much of the very generalised work has taken a perhaps over indulgent attitude to the violence of the Provisionals. Two good examples of this are David Reeds' *Ireland, The Key To The British Revolution*,²⁴ and Kevin Kelley's, *The Longest War, Northern Ireland And The IRA*.²⁵ Reed, is a British Marxist who as the title suggests takes the view that the Northern troubles are part of the greater revolution and makes a Marxist analyses of the PIRA campaign. The work is flawed by his failure to come to terms with his British nationality. This means that his work is largely an explanation or apologia for the republican movement. He views the more conservative sectarian sections of the movement as the reaction to British imperialism, rather than an Irish example of intolerance to outsiders. The failure to address the sectarian nature of the conflict and the republican movement, or its noted lack of success in winning any substantial support from the people of Ireland, in the end, leads one to feel that Reed will not address even in a constructive manner the ugly face of Irish republicanism. He is useful though in his slavish attachment to footnotes, a rather endearing habit of many Marxist writers. His use of republican publications which are difficult to otherwise have access to proved very useful in the initial stages of research.

24 Reed, (1984).

25 Kevin J. Kelley, *THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRA*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1988.

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On the other hand Kevin Kelly is an Irish/American socialist who sympathises with the aims and ideology of the Provisionals but can't in the end support the use of violence. Like Reed he applies what can be broadly termed a Marxist analyses to the troubles. At times though his ethnic identity gets in the way of his analyses, especially when dealing with the hunger strike, this can be seen by his emotive choice of chapter heading; *They Hunger For Justice*. It is unfortunate that he can't see the logical implication of his stated views. It seems that at heart he would prefer to support the Provisionals but has problems with their blood lust. This confusion flaws what could have been an interesting internationalist view of the conflict by an intelligent and well informed outsider. He also destroys much of his credibility by at the end refusing to address the republican movement's increasingly northern identity and its inability to unite even the urban Catholic population of Ulster, despite all the injustices which this community has suffered since partition. He suggests that there should be some form of peaceful mass uprising by the people of Ireland. This form of pointless idealism is not appropriate for a serious work on the subject.

On the other hand the Northern Irish journalists Patrick Bishop and Eamon Mallie in their book *The Provisional IRA*, like many other northern observers, are refreshingly realistic to the point of cynicism in their analyses of the motivations and actions of the key

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players in the Province.²⁶ Their freedom from the preconceived notions that afflict outside writers makes depressing reading but they produce a competent and well researched chapter on the hunger strike which was even handed and gives no favours to ether side.

It is unfortunate that many of the above mentioned writers have not chosen to study the prison dispute to a greater extent and that the constraints of writing a general history of the Provisionals over the last twenty-four years have meant that in the chapters dealing with this period many issues could only be touched upon.

26 Patrick Bishop & Eamon Mallie, **THE PROVISIONAL IRA**, London: Corgie, 1989.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE 1976-1981 PRISON DISPUTE.

2a. Introduction.

It is not easy to underestimate the power that history has in Ireland. One has only to wander around West Belfast to see this. In Protestant areas such as the Shankill, one is constantly reminded of the victory of King William of Orange against the Stuarts at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and the gable ends of the terraces with their "King Billys" on a charging white horse always make an impression. Similarly, when you cross into the Catholic areas such as the Falls Road, the gable ends will celebrate the 1916 Rising or many of the martyrs which republicanism has thrown up over the years. Prominent among these martyrs are the ten hunger strikers who died in 1981, and specifically the first man to die, Robert "Bobby" Sands.

In order to understand the motivations of Sands' and the other participants one must study the history of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and examine the way it developed during the current conflict in Northern Ireland. One must also examine the long history of resistance which has marked the conduct of republican prisoners over the last hundred years or so, for as with much else, the events of 1981 were not an original event but repetition of an old battle fought through the decades.

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Section 2b, examines the origins of the PIRA and traces its ancestry back to 1916 and the Dublin Easter Rebellion. The steady history of schisms and division is explained with an emphasis upon the strain between the political and military wings of the republican movement.

Section 2c, takes on the evolution of the younger northern leadership which was to take power in the Provisionals during the 1970's. The conflict within the movement between the Southern leadership and its largely northern membership is also looked at. The history of the development of their strategy of the "Armalite and the Ballot Paper" which was to be launched by the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes is examined.

Finally, in Section 2d, the history of republican Prison resistance is covered. The background goes back to the first attempts in the 1880's by Fenians to gain Prisoner of War (POW) status. The later actions by IRA prisoners are also examined in the section in an attempt to understand previous precedents to the 1981 fast.

2b. A BRIEF HISTORY ON THE ORIGINS OF THE PROVISIONAL IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY.

In order to understand many of the actions which republicans took during the prison dispute which lasted from 1976 to 1981, it is important to look to Ireland's past, for all sides in the current conflict take history extremely seriously and often use the past to justify their own actions or condemn those of their opponents.

The origins of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, as we know it today, lie back in 1922 with the Irish Civil War when the first IRA, which had been formed

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in 1919 from the disparate groups brought together in the 1916 Easter Rising, split in two, with one faction under Michael Collins (the Irish Republican Brotherhood's military commander) supporting the Anglo/Irish Treaty of 1921 and the partition of Ireland, this group became Cumann na nGaedheal. The other faction under Eamon de Valera (President of the pre-treaty Second Dail Eireann) continued to use the name of the IRA and opposed partition.¹ The two sides were soon locked in combat. However, the newly emerged Free State Army was able to win the civil war and force the IRA underground.

There was a further split in the IRA in 1926 when the remaining constitutionalists within the organization under de Valera recognized the Dail and chose to fight for a Republic and the unification of Ireland by largely peaceful means as the political party Fianna Fail. This left the IRA in the hands of hard-core republicans who strongly believed in the physical force tradition of Irish nationalism and refused to join what they regarded as a foreign controlled puppet Dail.² The IRA continued to remain occasionally active in both Ireland, usually by killing Garda Siochana and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers, and in Britain most famously in a series of bombings in England in 1939.³ The most recent "pre-troubles" example was an attempted border insurgency campaign between 1956 and 1962, which ended due to a lack of support from the Roman Catholic population in the

1 J. Bowyer Bell. **THE SECRET ARMY, A HISTORY OF THE IRA, 1916-1970.** London: Sphere Books, 1972, 55-58.

2 Bell, (1972), 55-58.

3 Tim Pat Coogan. **THE IRA.** Glasgow: Fontana/Collins Books, 1988, 167.

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North.⁴ After 1962, the IRA became increasingly dominated by left-wingers, led by Cathal Goulding. These theorists preferred to look for a class based revolution which would unite both Protestant and Catholic workers in a non-sectarian socialist united Ireland.⁵

The by now neo-Marxist IRA began to look on Ireland with a view to becoming a far more constitutionalist organization. However, in the late 1960's Northern Ireland began to grow unstable again. Young Catholics, especially from the universities, began to resent the domination of the Province by the Protestant unionists who unashamedly Gerrymandered (arranged constituency boundaries at the expense of the Catholics) local elections. This ensured that areas like Londonderry City with a large Catholic majority would elect a Unionist council which would then ensure that Catholics would be allocated the worst housing and allowed firms to discriminate in favour of Protestants along with many more manifestly unfair practices against the minority.⁶ This was excused by many unionists on the basis that Protestants were loyal to the Crown and so deserved help,

4 In a statement at the end of the campaign (26 Feb 1962) the IRA said a factor had been the attitude of the public, *"whose minds have been deliberately distracted from the supreme issue facing the Irish people- the unity and freedom of Ireland"*.

Coogan, (1988), 418.

5 In 1967 at the annual Bodinstown oration Goulding said that social and economic goals should take priority over the ending of partition.

Coogan, (1988), 308-309.

6 Paul Arthur & Keith Jeffrey. **NORTHERN IRELAND SINCE 1968**, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, 5.

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while Catholics were a rebel community and so should not be trusted.⁷

While this dissent was largely led by Catholics however, it also included liberal Protestants and was not at first a republican movement. In fact the civil rights movement made a special point of rejecting the old order represented as much by the Catholic Nationalist party as by the Protestant Unionists. This non-traditional outlook was shown by their use of the slogan "*British Rights for British Citizens*". This also summarized their demands, which were non-discrimination, a right to a fair vote, and improved housing in the Catholic ghettos like the Bogside and West-Belfast.⁸ This did not prevent the largely Protestant RUC and the brutal B-Specials (a Protestant militia that was officially a reserve police force) from viciously attacking the civil rights marchers and subsequently trying to enter Catholic areas, most notably Londonderry's Bogside. The residents of the Bogside defended their area well at first from the police, and then from the Protestant mobs that followed when the police were overwhelmed; this resulted in a period of serious rioting and the Province teetered on the point of civil war. This caused great concern in London and Dublin, who both feared the destabilizing

7 A good examination of the phenomena of Paisleyism as a creed and ideology, which explains many of the reasons behind modern Protestant bigotry is, Steve Bruce. **GOD SAVE ULSTER! THE RELIGION AND POLITICS OF PAISLEYISM**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, Chapters 3 and 4.

8 Tim Pat Coogan. **DISILLUSIONED DECADES, IRELAND 1966-1987**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 188.

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effect which an all out civil war would have on their respective countries.⁹

The Catholics then organized Citizens Defence Committees which turned to the dormant IRA for weapons, training and help. In August 1969 the British Army were then sent in to aid the civil power because the police could no longer operate as a peace keeping force to restore order and prevent a civil war breaking out¹⁰. However, they had arrived too late to put the IRA back to sleep.

As soon as the immediate threat to the Catholic areas was lifted by the presence of troops, the IRA began to discuss how it should use the situation to achieve its aims. It was at this time the IRA began to split again between physical force republicans and the more moderate political wing of the organization (known as the Officials). This time the split resembled the division between the *Mensheviks* and *Bolsheviks* in pre-revolutionary Russia.

The Officials did not feel that the population was ready for revolutionary violence while the more pragmatic Provisionals (PIRA) wanted to take advantage of the chaos that existed in Ulster after the troops were sent in. They argued that this was probably the best chance that they had to force an end to British rule in Ulster.¹¹ Another factor was the need to act before any of the

9 Clive Limpkin. **BATTLE OF THE BOGSIDE**. London: Penguin, 1972, & Desmond Hamill. **PIG IN THE MIDDLE: THE ARMY IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1969-1984**. London: Methuen, 1986, 5.

10 Desmond Hamill, (1986), 7.

11 Sean MacStiofain. **MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONARY**. Edinburgh: Gordon Cremonesi, 1975, 135-137.

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reforms, which Northern Ireland's Prime Minister, Captain Terrence O'Neill had introduced, could dampen Catholic anger at the Protestants, although O'Neill lost his position in April 1969 and was replaced by the genial but ineffective conservative James Chichester-Clark.

The split took place in the autumn of 1969 after events in August which had discredited the IRA as an effective protector of the Catholic community because of an inability to defend the gheto's. This led to a dissatisfaction with the idealism of Gouldings neo-Marxist theorising, amongst the Northerners who needed protection from the Protestants. The split, largely confined to Belfast, was to be confirmed when in October the IRA's ruling Army Council voted by twelve votes to eight to abandon abstentionism (the taking of seats in legislatures). This meant that by December many traditionalists (especially those from Belfast Brigade) chose to ignore an Army Convention called to approve the issue. When the convention approved the policy change the traditionalists established a new Army Convention which supported abstentionism and elected a new Executive with provisional status which then elected a new Army Council. This was to stay provisional for only ten months until September 1970, but by that time the status was to have given the new movement its name (with its intentional echo of the Provisional government declared in 1916).¹² This split at times threatened to become an internecine feud, but with a few exceptions, while there was no love

12 Patrick Bishop & Eamoun Mallie, *THE PROVISIONAL IRA*. London: Corgie, 1989, 132-137.

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lost between the two factions, there was relatively little violence between them. Although they still remain hostile to one another twenty-three years later.

When the cease fire was established in 1972 the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA or Officials) ceased violent activity, as did PIRA. However, once the cease-fire collapsed, PIRA chose to escalate the level of attacks, regularly killing policemen and soldiers while the Officials chose to give up the gun.¹³ Subsequently, the residue of the OIRA split again, with the remaining physical force supporters leaving to form the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and its para-military wing the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).¹⁴ Later, the INLA was to split in the most violent of all the para-military separations in 1986/87, when its Belfast Brigade formed the Irish Peoples Liberation Organisation (IPLO).

The remains of the OIRA now rest in the Workers Party (also known as the Republican Clubs during the early 1980's) in Ulster and Sinn Fein-the Workers Party in the Republic (now the United Left in the South after another split in 1992). In the South the Workers Party has retained much of the old IRA's support while in the North this support has largely gone to the Provisional *Sinn Fein* (PSF) the political arm of PIRA.

Thus, in the North a new organization which had not existed in 1968 had developed out of the citizens defence groups. This became known as the Provisional IRA. It

13 Coogan, (1988), 570.

14 **TIMES**, 19 March 1980.

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inherited the physical force tradition of Irish nationalism and set out to force the British out of Ireland in the belief that one big push was all that was needed. It became properly active in 1971 both militarily and politically with PSF and set out on its lethal war with the security forces.

It was at this stage of the conflict when the casualty rate was at the very highest in the present conflict in the North.¹⁵ This was also when the machinery of the security forces was being developed. The most important long term judicial effect of this period was the introduction of one judge juryless courts for scheduled (paramilitary) offences. This was because of the fear of the probable intimidation of juries by paramilitaries.¹⁶

This special treatment for paramilitaries was not the only change from the judicial norm, as in August 1971 the government at Stormont announced that it had introduced the internment without trial of suspected members of paramilitary organisations.¹⁷ As it turned out this became arguably the biggest mistake made in the "troubles" by the authorities. The lists which the army and police used were frequently out of date and many people were unjustly imprisoned because of this mixture of incompetence and stupidity. Internment was abandoned by the Labour Party when they resumed power as it had

15 See Appendix II.

16 Lord Diplock, REPORT OF THE COMMISSION TO CONSIDER LEGAL PROCEDURES TO DEAL WITH TERRORIST ACTIVITIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND. London: H.M.S.O, December 1972 , 17-19.

17 Robert Bell, Robert Johnstone & Robin Wilson. TROUBLED TIMES, FORTNIGHT MAGAZINE AND THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1970-91. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991, 152.

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patently failed and did more damage than it was worth, by gaining sympathy for the republicans. Further, because of Stormont's (the Northern Irish Parliament) impatience to use internment, not enough time was given to accumulate accurate information. Finally, despite the activity of the Protestant supremacist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) all the people interned were republicans until direct rule (when Stormont was suspended in 1972 allowing Westminster to take over). This helped discredit the already unpopular British Army in the eyes of the nationalist population. Its failure has also discredited internment, probably for good, when it could have had a vital role to play in destroying the Provisionals.¹⁸

Linked to the introduction of internment was the use of torture by the security forces in Northern Ireland upon internees during interrogation. The allegations concerning the torture of at least 250 people at Hollywood and Girdwood Barracks, which included beatings, sensory deprivation, electric shocks and sleep deprivation were compiled by two Catholic priests Fathers Denis Faul and Raymond Murray.¹⁹ This led to the government of the Irish Republic deciding that it should take these complaints to the European Court of Human Rights and led to the Court's criticism of the "*inhuman and degrading treatment*" given to eight internees by the Army.²⁰ Thus, the British had by 1975 lost all support

18 Chris Ryder, **THE RUC, A FORCE UNDER FIRE**. London: Madrarin, 1989, 122-123.

19 John McGuffin, **THE GUINEAPIGS**. London: Penguin Books, 1974, 133-135.

20 Paul Foot, **WHO FRAMED COLLIN WALLACE?**. London: Pan Books, 1990, 12.

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from the nationalist community due to a lack of consideration for the sensitivities of the community, although the population was not yet prepared to support the Provisionals either. It was to take a hunger strike and five more years of short sighted policy before that became a serious possibility.

However, PIRA strategy was beginning to fail by the mid-1970's, largely due to the successful infiltration by the RUC Special Branch at every level of the PIRA structure, leading to an operational life expectancy for a volunteer of only three months before he or she was arrested or killed.²¹ This led to dissatisfaction within the younger leadership which was largely directed towards the southern dominated Army Council in Dublin. This disaffection mirrored the feelings of the Provisionals in 1969 towards the OIRA. The split in 1969 had been dominated by disaffected northerners and it was largely the same personalities from that split who now wanted the end of the southern domination of the leadership, specifically the leadership of Daithi O'Connell and Ruairi O'Bradaigh who represented the conservative Celtic traditional republicanism popular in the rural areas but an anathema to the urbanites in Belfast and Londonderry.

2c. THE RISE OF THE NORTHERNERS IN PIRA.

While the Provisional/Official split of 1969/70 had been powered by the northerners especially in Belfast, the Provisional leadership was still largely Southern based and ideologically conservative or traditional in

21 Special Correspondent. *THE PROVISIONALS HAVE SECOND THOUGHTS, FORTNIGHT*, July-August 1982, 4.

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based and ideologically conservative or traditional in its beliefs. This outlook was not shared by the younger leadership from the North who had become graduates of the so called "Republican University" at LongKesh Prison. It was here that the liberal prison regime (introduced after Billy McKee's hunger strike in 1972) enabled the prisoners to study the conflict outside the prison with a leisure unavailable to those directly involved in the fighting.

The Northerners had discussed the conclusions of their studies in prison and agreed that there had to be changes once they were released. These Northerners included names that were to dominate the republican movement for the following decade and a half and included Gerry Adams, Brian Keenan and Ivor Bell who along with Joe Cahill and Martin McGuinness, became proteges of the then Chief of staff Seamus Twomey, one of the few Ulstermen on the Provisionals ruling Army Council.²² They agreed a plan while still in prison which was to be enacted upon their release. Firstly, they had to replace the membership of the Army Council which was the successor to the second *Dail* of 1921 (which the IRA recognised as the last legitimate government and from which it claims descent) from which both the OIRA and PIRA claimed their legitimacy. Despite this rather tenuous link to the past, it was felt that the Army Council was both too old and too conservative to enact the reforms needed.²³ Once they

22 Edgar O'Ballance. *IRA LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS. BRITISH PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 79, & Clarke, (1987), Chap 5.

23 FORTNIGHT. July-August 1982, 4-5.

this aim under the guidance of Seamus Twomey, allegedly at the point of a gun, a working party under Gerry Adams produced a staff report which recommended that the PIRA should change dramatically. This could be summarized under three points.²⁴

1. Improved training to enable captured volunteers to resist interrogation during three day and seven day detention orders.
2. The phasing out of the Brigade and company system and its replacement with a more disciplined cell structure.
3. The creation of a political role for Provisional Sinn Fein (PSF) in republican areas, remaining under PIRA control at all times, trying to build up community support by helping in both a welfare capacity and giving free advice on local problems.²⁵

This was linked to an attempt to outline the movement's ideology in a new training manual which became known as the **Green Book**.

It took the northerners about three years to achieve their aims. First they "persuaded" the old Army Council to resign²⁶. Once the northerners had consolidated their power, they then reorganised the Provisionals army structure. In the early 1970's PIRA was run along traditional military lines.²⁷ An Army Council was in overall command and was responsible for policy and

24 Document captured in 1977 published as an appendix in Clarke, (1986), 251-253.

25 Ibid, 251-253.

26 **FORTNIGHT**. July-August 1982, 4-5.

27 O'Ballance, (1981), 80.

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tactics this was chaired by the Chief of Staff who was in effect leader of the PIRA.

Under the Army Council, which was responsible for the running of operations, came the Brigade's who would be led by the Brigade Commander and his staff officers. The Brigade's territory would follow the boundaries of the counties and the cities as decided, ironically, by the British in the nineteenth century. The British stopped using these counties in the early 1970's, but the PIRA still clings to their use, so one would, for example, have the City of Derry Brigade and the County Derry Brigade covering the city and county of Londonderry. Where support was high for the Provisionals one would also see the counties divided, as was case with North Armagh Brigade and South Armagh Brigade (one of the most independent minded of all Brigades).²⁸ Belfast, with the largest number of members, had the Brigade split into three different Battalions with an internal command structure each but under the over all command of the Brigade Commander and his lieutenants.

The "army" structure had a number of advantages in that it gave great flexibility in operational planning and allowed a Brigade Commander to organize an operation at the drop of a hat.²⁹ It was also useful to get volunteers committed fast, ensuring greater loyalty from new recruits in that they would be involved from an early stage. Finally, it also gave people an idea of the role

28 Information compiled from *ROLE OF HONOUR, AN PHOBLACT/REPUBLICAN NEWS*, 12 April 1990.

29 *FORTNIGHT*. July-August 1982, 4-5.

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that they were playing and the idea that they had a full picture of events within their area.

These positive factors were outweighed by several drawbacks. The Brigades were easily infiltrated by the RUC Special Branch ensuring a very high loss rate amongst the volunteers.³⁰ It was also very wasteful as people would often be taken along for the ride to operations, sometimes up to twelve men when only two or three would be needed. This led to operations being easily spotted by the security forces and an increased number of both fatalities and arrests. In addition, it was also more likely that an action might be blown by an informer the more people knew about it before it began³¹. There was also the problem of people boasting or talking about their involvement when they were in a bar drinking. It is known that the British Army would send in intelligence people specifically to listen to the gossip in bars, and when the Green Book was being written its authors felt sufficiently worried to write a warning about loose talk while drinking.³²

This led the younger leaders under Twomey, to decide that the whole structure of the organization as well as training and tactics should change if they were not to be beaten soon. This was to be very important as the reforms they produced were to change the face of Ulster politics. The movement as a whole had to take account of the progression of the conflict from the early stages of the

30 O'Ballance, (1981), 79.

31 Ibid, 79.

32 **THE GREEN BOOK** published as an appendix to, Coogan, (1990), 680.

defence of the Catholic ghettos through a "year of victory" policy, when they hoped to push the British out to a new situation of a protracted war of attrition where the solution would be political. The role of the PIRA was to make the British sufficiently tired and sick of the conflict to abandon the Protestants, in the same way they had left Cyprus and Kenya as a result of military resistance to the continued British presence.³³ They had come too late to this realisation as the security policy of Ulsterisation had been introduced. This deprived the PIRA of the chance of killing many British soldiers who were replaced by men of the locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the RUC. The death of local security force members did not have the same impact in the mainland as a British death.³⁴ The captured Provisional staff report taking account of the new situation said,

*We must gear ourselves towards long term armed struggle based on putting unknown men and new recruits into a new structure. The new structure shall be a cell system.*³⁵

This reflected the increasing influence that left-wing guerilla theorists like Che Guevara, Mao Tse-Tung, and Carlos Marighela were having upon the northerners. In *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara emphasizes the need for rigid central control of the urban guerrilla unit and stated that it should consist of no more than four to five

33 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 171.

34 Ibid, 227 & 325.

35 Document captured in 1977, published as an appendix in, Clarke, (1986), 251-253.

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men.³⁶ He explained that this is necessary for operating in the urban environment which he describes as,

*exceptionally unfavourable ground, where the vigilance of the enemy will be much greater and the possibilities of reprisals as well as of betrayal are increased enormously.*³⁷

This advice was taken to heart and used with the introduction of the cell system. It proved effective in reducing the numbers of PIRA losses and restricting the flow of basic raw intelligence on the organization being collected by the security forces, because of their reduced size. By 1990 this meant that the PIRA had reduced in size to some eighty men based around eight ASU's operating in the Province according to Richard Clutterbuck.³⁸ Other estimates put the size of PIRA as between 250 and 600.³⁹ Guevara also advised that specialization should be increased within the cell.⁴⁰ This was virtually reproduced in the staff report, "*Cells must be specialized into IC [Intelligence Collection] cells, Sniping cells, execution, bombing, robberies etc.*"⁴¹

There was some opposition to the new cell structure. However, in time most volunteers saw the advantages of the system though they disliked both the secrecy and discipline of the new structure. Those that felt they

36 Che Guevara, **GUERRILLA WARFARE**. London: Pelican Books, 1969, 39.

37 Ibid, 39.

38 Richard Clutterbuck, **TERRORISM, DRUGS & CRIME IN EUROPE AFTER 1992**, London: Routledge, 1990, 76.

39 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 387, and Security Forces Assesment December 1991.

40 Guevara, (1969), 39.

41 Document captured in 1977, published as an appendix in Clarke, (1986), 251-253.

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could not work in the new system chose to retire or went into Provisional Sinn Fein or the INLA.⁴²

The new structure had become functional by 1979 and PIRA has continued to use it since then. It had also changed the pattern of violence in Ireland as the PIRA became increasingly removed from their origins as guerrilla fighters and began to resemble the European Terror groups of that time. Firstly, because of their need for security, the cells began to become removed from the normal day to day life of the nationalist community despite the new role for PSF.⁴³ Secondly, the nature of the cells would need increased organization and lengthen the time spent on the planning operations. This meant that PIRA would have to plan an operation weeks in advance increasing target selection and largely concentrating on terror tactics such as assassination rather than the guerilla warfare (fighting with uniformed soldiers on duty etc) of the early 1970's. This meant an increased use of soft targets like off-duty police and members of the UDR. This has led to a substantial drop in casualties, especially of soldiers who are no longer on the frontline, as it were, which had changed from the security forces on active duty to the off-duty locals.⁴⁴ This has meant increased success in the British attempts to contain violence in Ulster rather than to stop it.

However, in introducing the new structure the left of the Provisionals probably saved their organization from defeat, and as such ensured that violence would

42 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 30 October 1979.

43 O'Ballance, (1981), 81.

44 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 328.

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continue to be a feature of Irish politics for many years and so maintain the sterility of the political debate. This sterility is probably the Provisionals greatest ally as this maintains the sectarian nature of the conflict resulting in greater support amongst the Catholic/nationalist community because of their traditional role as defenders of the ghettos.

The use of left-wing theories, especially those of Che Guevara, Mao Tse-Tung, and Carlos Marighela were important in inspiring the changes suggested in the staff report especially in regard to the political role envisioned in it for PSF. This may seem initially rather surprising as they spoke from a specifically Developing World anti-imperialist perspective, and preferred rural/guerilla warfare to terrorism unlike the European groups that are the PIRAs peers. The European groups grew up from the 1960's student groups and this is reflected in the makeup of the groups members in that they largely came from the middle class and so perceived themselves to be an anti-government revolutionary terror groups aimed at radicalizing the masses.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the PIRA draws its members largely, though by no means exclusively, from the working class, so they frequently have little formal education beyond school level.⁴⁶ Its members also do not perceive themselves as a terror group but as the legal inheritors of the second Dail and so the legitimate legal government

45 US Government, **TERRORIST GROUP PROFILES**. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988, 61.

46 Coogan, (1988), 582.

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of all Ireland.⁴⁷ In this context they see themselves as a resistance group fighting an anti-colonial war against an illegal occupying force. It must also be borne in mind that they regard themselves as the successors of over eight hundred years of resistance against the English going back to the Norman invasion of Ireland in 1169⁴⁸. This resistance to the English included incidents like the Ulster rising and Cromwell's suppression in the seventeenth century, the United Irishmen's rebellion under Wolfe Tone in the eighteenth century, the Fenian movement in the nineteenth century, and the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin. This strong romantic and often romanticized tradition has created a mythology which attracts recruits into the PIRA who have no real political view save for a strong feeling of nationalism and possibly a wish to tread along the same path as their forefathers.⁴⁹ This has created an organization that is at once both revolutionary and conservative which despises its ideological European peers, and looks upon itself as fighting a war more in the context of the liberation movements of the Developing World with similar simple objectives; such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the African National Congress (ANC). The PIRA also feels sympathy with the nationalist organizations within Europe like the Basque separatists

47 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 15.

48 The GREEN BOOK states that Irish,

...civilisation was a shining light throughout Europe prior to the Norman invasion of 1169 with which there commenced more than 8 centuries of RELENTLESS AND UNREMITTING WARFARE that has lasted down to this very day.

Published as an appendix in Coogan, (1988), 683.

49 Clarke, (1986), 1.

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Fatherland and Liberty) and the Cypriots who fought the British under General Grivas in EOKA (*Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston*-National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters).⁵⁰

Another possible reason for Guevara's influence which must also be taken account of is simply fashion. Most of the so called northern junta came of age in the 1960's when Guevara was as much admired for his image of rebellion as for his views (a revolutionary James Dean!). Guevara not only recommended an additional role for the revolutionary as a social reformer, but also interestingly stated that one should not use violence if there was even an ineffectual form of democracy. Adams and his allies realised that they needed violence to remain an important force and argue that the Six Counties are a gerrymander and that the only legitimate political unit would be the Thirty-two Counties.⁵¹ The role of PSF in trying to involve itself in the campaigns to improve conditions in Dublin's more notorious housing estates, and the advice centres in Ulster, are both examples of this attempt to gain support over issues outside the normal areas of its appeal. This also links in nicely with both Marighela's and Mao's guerilla theories which were advocated by Adams in *Republican News* under his covername of Brownie in the mid-1970's.⁵² In these articles he called on the whole community to become involved in the "struggle". As Mao states co-operation

50 O'Ballance, (1981), 79.

51 Guevara, (1969), 45-47.

52 Clarke, (1986), 30.

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with civilians is vital for the survival of the irregular fighter on enemy ground.

Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemies rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be linked to water and the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together?⁵³

It is also the case that Marighela felt that the urban fighter had a dual role of soldier and of propagandist, suggesting that an alternative press should be established to inform the workers and students of the guerillas aims so that the people know the slogan: "*Let him who will do nothing for the revolution at least do nothing against it*".⁵⁴ A view which the PIRA and PSF, given the large numbers of Catholics who vote SDLP but live in republican areas, would be keen to promote.

In all of this probably Guevara's most important influence was in supplying a theory of irregular warfare that involved long term conflict at a time when the Provisionals needed it, after their first strategy of the "year of victory" had been discredited. This has allowed PSF to say that they feel that their victory will not come for many years without losing too much support.

The final recommendation of the staff report was that the movement should take a far more active role in electoral politics while also using violence at the same time. This was to see the end of abstentionism in any Irish political body though not Westminster by 1986.⁵⁵

53 Mao Tse-Tung & Che Guevara. **GUERRILLA WARFARE**. London: Cassell, 1968, 67.

54 Carlos Marighela, **FOR THE LIBERATION OF BRAZIL**. London: Penguin, 1971, 88-90.

55 Coogan, (1987), 234.

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This broke with many old conventions within republican politics and perhaps understandably caused some opposition from conservatives within the movement. It also shocked and horrified the unionists who in many cases found themselves sitting beside PSF councillors around the Province and radically changed the political outlook of many nationalist areas, especially in Derry City Council. In the case of Derry, politics were now inter-nationalist, between the SDLP and PSF rather than unionist verses nationalist as it was before.

At the 1981 PSF ard fheis (Annual Conference) in Dublin, Danny Morrison asked a rhetorical question to the assembled delegates He asked if anyone would object if PSF and PIRA took power, *"with a ballot box paper in one hand and an Armalite in the other"*.⁵⁶ This statement was to summarize the new "Armalite and Ballot Box" strategy that was the logical progression to the plan proposed in 1977 in the captured staff report. This was also mentioned in PIRA's training manual the so called **Green Book** which outlined the new role for PSF, which formerly had played second fiddle to the Provisionals up until then. The PSF was to remain under *"Army control"* at all times. However, it had a separate role to play: apart from simply supporting the armed struggle it would build up a support base within the nationalist community campaigning on bread and butter social issues through advice centres in the ghettos which would provide free advice on things like overdue electricity bills or

56 Ibid, 233.

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council house rents.⁵⁷ This it was hoped would give PSF a role in local government, and increased credibility as the representative of nationalist opinion rather than the anti-IRA nationalists in the SDLP. It was also a new stick with which to beat the British and the unionists.

This new policy created some problems with the more conservative republicans who felt that the abstentionist policy of PSF was one of the tenets of militant republicanism. This view is illustrated from as late as 1978 when the ard fheis of that year rejected the idea of putting up candidates for the European parliament.⁵⁸ This rejection of participation politics was for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was through a fear that the Provisionals were going political. This was understandable if one looks at the history of the IRA and the amount of times that its leadership grew tired of violence and chose the political path, as already outlined above. Secondly, it was feared that the new political campaign would be at the cost of the armed struggle and this is probably why the staff report and many of the writings of the leadership of PSF constantly affirm their commitment to violence. On a practical side one can say that PIRA has suffered as most of the best recruits to republicanism today go into PSF rather than the PIRA, but it is unlikely that this was a major complaint at the time.

The conservatives were also worried about the leftist leanings of the northerners. In 1978 the

57 Document captured in 1977, published as an appendix in Clarke, (1986), 251-253.

58 Clarke, (1986), 97.

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Trotskyist leader of the Fourth International was introduced to the *ard fheis* and Adams in his own writing has often referred to James Connolly, the founder of the Irish Labour Party, as an inspiration. He has also said that all true Irish socialists should be republicans and his writing continually refers to a republicanism based on the fight against capitalism whilst talking about the Protestant workers as being duped into supporting the unionist ascendancy. He uses the old left-wing polemical style in his writing and refers to all Irish opponents as reactionary whether the Democratic Unionist Party (D.U.P) or *Fianna Fail*.⁵⁹ This was the reason why he and the other Northerners became known as the left, and a number of the rural conservatives with their attachment to traditional Catholic values did not trust the move to socialism. It also alarmed American sympathisers as the bed-rock of United States (US) support lies in the conservative Irish-American population who do not look on the armed struggle as an ideological revolutionary movement but simply as a "Brits Out" campaign. This has led to Adams being very careful in emphasising that there were republicans who were not socialist and that republicanism was a broad church with one primary aim, that of the expulsion of the British from Ulster and the removal of all British influence from the Thirty-two Counties as a whole.⁶⁰

59 Examples of Gerry Adams style and beliefs are seen in his Book **THE POLITICS OF IRISH FREEDOM** and his work in **REPUBLICAN NEWS** under the pseudonym of Brownie

60 **DAILY TELEGRAPH**, 30 October 1979.

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However by force of spirit and the large amount of influence that the northerners had built up, they managed to drop abstentionism within Ireland but not in Westminster or Strasburg. This left a disillusioned minority of hard core conservatives within the movement and caused a small and altogether insignificant split (worth mentioning only because it was led by the former President and Vice President of PSF, Ruairi O'Bradaigh and Daithi O'Connell), with the formation of an abstentionist party called Republican Sinn Fein in 1986.⁶¹

2d. THE PRISONS AND THE REPUBLICAN MOVEMENT.

Any terrorist movement will be preoccupied about what happens to its fighters if they are captured by the enemy. This will often take the form of attempts to gain the release of imprisoned comrades in kidnap or hijacking incidents. Examples of this are manifold. In 1970 the British government of Edward Heath released the Popular Front For The Liberation Of Palestine (PFLP) hijacker Leila Khaled after a British plane was hijacked to Jordan.⁶² In another example the former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro was murdered in 1978 by the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*) after the authorities in Italy refused to release imprisoned terrorists.⁶³ The republican movement in Ireland is no different in this respect from any of its peers, though it has only rarely tried to kidnap people to further its aims in this

61 Clarke, (1986), 238.

62 Edward F. Mickolus. **TRANS NATIONAL TERRORISM, A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS, 1968 TO 1979.** London: Aldwych Press, 1980, 214-215.

63 US Government, (1988), 71.

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manner, and in most cases when it has tried this technique the object was for financial gain rather than with any political objective as in the Don Tidey affair.⁶⁴

Over time the theory has evolved that PIRA members in prison are not so much removed from the struggle but rather fighting on another front against the authorities. At the same time they can use the enforced leisure available as a valuable training period with a chance to teach PIRA members many of the theoretical aspects of republicanism and the movement's rather one sided interpretation of Irish history and culture. The whole prison strategy of the republicans could be summarized in a sentence by the former hunger striker and some time leader of PIRA in Belfast and Chief of Staff, William "Billy" McKee, *"This war will be won in the prisons."*⁶⁵

This view of prisoners has over the years created a mythology surrounding captured PIRA volunteers which was to make the H-Block protest of the late 1970's and early 1980's an especially useful platform for the northern left in order to expand the arena of their war from the republican ghettos of Ulster, to the television screens of the world. However, the origin of this philosophy stems from the pre-independence period of Irish republicanism and the subsequent development of the IRA,

64 One of the exceptions to this was in the early 1970's when PIRA made plans to kidnap the Dutch Ambassador in Dublin to trade for two arms smugglers Maria Maguire and Daithi O'Connell who were at that time on the run in Holland.

Martin Dillon. **THE DIRTY WAR**. London: Hutchinson, 1990, 429.

65 Tim Pat Coogan. **ON THE BLANKET**. Swords, Co. Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 73.

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and later on PIRA. This means that it is important to trace the origins of this philosophy to help understand the motivations of the hunger strikers and PIRA during the prisons dispute which at times did not seem to outsiders to make any sense. Tim Pat Coogan's, *On the Blanket*, covers the history of the prisons dispute exhaustively and so the aim here is simply to give a brief summary of the main stages in the development of the philosophy of the prisons dispute.⁶⁶

The power of the idea of sacrifice in Irish culture should not be underestimated by the outside observer. The nationalist community in Ireland is strongly Catholic and so is brought up practically from the cradle to revere suffering and martyrdom. It is only a small step to translate the Christian belief of dying for the sake of others to the prisoners who may have been wrong but who are perceived to be fighting for a higher cause, who are willing to die so that their comrades can live a better life.⁶⁷ This playing on the deep seated emotions of the Catholic population was both obvious and easy for Sinn Fein. This was made even easier because of the long tradition of hunger striking in Ireland.

In the medieval period the Irish Civil Code (the *Senchus Mor*) featured two recognized forms of self starvation. One was *Trosscad* (fasting on or against a person) and the other *Cealachan* (achieving justice by starvation).⁶⁸ The strike would normally be held on the

66 Ibid, 73.

67 David Beresford. *TEN MEN DEAD*. London: Graphton Books, 1987, 15.

68 Ibid, 15-16.

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doorstep of the person it was directed against and, if the strike resulted in death, the targeted person would be held responsible. This tradition also found a place in Celtic Christianity with legends of St Patrick going on hunger strike against God and winning. Also in many peoples perceptions fasting is associated with oppressed people fighting for justice, whether the Suffragettes or Mahatma Gandhi fighting the British in India.⁶⁹ This has made starvation an extremely powerful weapon in Ireland, although as we shall see it is also a double edged weapon.

The IRA has a long tradition of creating martyrs out of members who have been gaoled. This dates back to the end of the nineteenth century when the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was imprisoned in 1865 and refused to be treated as a criminal prisoner, for which he was punished. The conditions in which he was held were publicized as part of an emancipation campaign after his arms were manacled behind his back for thirty-five days after throwing the contents of his chamber pot at the Prison Governor. This led to his standing as a candidate for the Westminster by-election in Tipperary in 1870 on a Republican ticket while he was still a prisoner.⁷⁰ To this day O'Donovan Rossa is held in especially high regard by the Provisionals because of the role that his funeral played in Dublin during 1915. It started off the chain of events in Ireland which led directly to the 1916

69 Ibid, 15-16.

70 Robert Kee, **THE GREEN FLAG**. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972, 358.

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Easter Rebellion.⁷¹ At his funeral Padraic Pearce, the future leader of the 1916 Rising, was to give a rousing oration which showed the importance of the past and the republican prisoners, and would not look out of place coming from any present day republican.

*Life springs from death and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations... They [the British] think that they have pacified Ireland... But the fools, the fools, the fools, they have left our Fenian dead and while Ireland holds these graves Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.*⁷²

The initial public sympathy generated by the descriptions of the conditions in which O'Donovan Rossa was held were increased when the leadership of the Easter Rising was summarily executed by the British, thereby creating the IRA's first martyrs.⁷³

The importance of political status to republicanism must be remembered. Any attempt at portraying prisoners as criminals would be fought at any cost. The belief that a republican prisoner is a patriot and not a criminal is fairly widespread in Ireland, even among people who are not supporters of physical force nationalism. The PIRA cherish this belief, and so all wings of the republican movement will resist any attempt at challenging this status.⁷⁴

71 This view might be disputed by many modern Irish historians, however this is how the republicans read the events and so it is important to use this reading of history when covering the prisons campaign. This is most recently be illustrated in An Phoblacht/Republican News occasional series of historical articles.

AN PHOBLACT/REPUBLICAN NEWS, 2 August 1990.

72 Ibid

73 Coogan, (1980), 17.

74 Beresford, (1987), 26.

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The prisoners taken in the 1916 Rising were to set the precedents for their lineal descendants in later years. Another ex-Fenian, Thomas Clarke, who was to take part in the actual rebellion, made a prison diary outlining his experience in the prisons. This has inspired many republicans who have subsequently chosen the same path to do likewise.⁷⁵

Sinn Fein also began to learn how to use the prisoner's plight as a propaganda weapon. Gerald Boland, a prisoner who went on to become a Fianna Fail Justice Minister, stated in Coogan's book.

We weren't badly treated really, we had enough to eat, we could get parcels and there was liberty enough in the compounds. But we made out we were given a dog's life. Every little thing we blew up for publicity. We'd do anything for a crack at the British. We had the whole country agog with our propaganda.⁷⁶

Perhaps it is not surprising that he and his government were unsympathetic when dealing with IRA claims of maltreatment of prisoners in the Southern gaols when it was their turn to face a prisons campaign, an issue dealt with later in this chapter.

For Sinn Fein this propaganda also opened up the possibility of running prisoners for parliament, emulating O'Donovan Rossa's success in the nineteenth century. The first case of this was Joseph McGuinness, one of the 1916 rebels and a prisoner in Lewes Prison, who was elected the Member of Parliament (MP) for South Longford in May 1917 after being selected by a national council of all Irish nationalist organisations. The

75 Coogan, (1980), 19.

76 Ibid, 20.

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victory was based on a campaign slogan of "*put him in to get him out*" which accompanied a picture of a man in prison uniform⁷⁷. A contemporary report in the *Manchester Guardian* stated that this political victory by the republicans was the equivalent to "*a serious British defeat in the field*".⁷⁸ This defeat was soon turned to a rout by Sinn Fein's victory in the 1918 general election. The factor that had swung support in Sinn Fein's favour had been caused by events at Mountjoy Prison amongst the prisoners.

The volunteers in the prison were demanding to be treated as prisoners of war. This was because the status of political prisoner gave no special treatment, but the UK gave special treatment to prisoners of war so this was what was called for by the republicans. In order to protest at the failure of the government to give them political status the volunteers refused to wear prison uniform and would not perform prison work. Then they decided to take up hunger strikes. The authorities had recent experience of politically motivated prisoners fasting, because of the pre-war suffragettes' use of this weapon (often imprisoned for what would now be described as acts of political violence like arson). This meant that it was standard practice to force feed prisoners on hunger strike. In total forty men were subjected to this process. The practice involved tying the prisoner to a chair and placing an eighteen-inch rubber tube down the throat (via either the mouth or the nose if the volunteer

77 Tim Pat Coogan, *IRELAND SINCE THE RISING*. London: Pall Mall Press, 1966, 22.

78 Quoted in Coogan, (1980), 20.

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proved recalcitrant) and pumping two beaten eggs and a pint of warm milk into the stomach. This normally took five to ten minutes and the prisoner normally vomited when the tube went down the throat and often the nose and throat bled. On 25 September 1917 the process led to the death of Thomas Ashe.⁷⁹

The funeral plans were made by Michael Collins for the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). The body lay in state in Dublin's City Hall and the procession of between thirty and forty thousand people followed the coffin flanked by armed IRB volunteers and members of the socialist Citizen's Army led by Constance Markievicz. The death illustrated dramatically how even one dead prisoner could revive the fortunes of Sinn Fein when support had been declining. Even the *Daily Express* commented that the death had turned a hundred-thousand Sinn Feiners out of a hundred-thousand constitutional nationalists.⁸⁰ Republicans have also argued that the use of hunger strikes has been effective as a weapon in forcing concessions from the British within the prisons, especially in the granting to IRA prisoners the most desirable objective, "political status". Gerry Adams in his Book *The Politics Of Irish Freedom* gives an account of the hunger strike by Ashe pointing out that the death also resulted in the authorities giving in to the prisoners demands.⁸¹ It showed that one could use the plight of the prisoners as a vehicle for gaining more support among an electorate which perhaps normally would not vote for Sinn Fein, a

79 Kee, (1972), 606-607.

80 Ibid, 608-609.

81 Gerry Adams, (1987), 69-71.

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lesson that was not lost on the H-Block support committee sixty-two years later. The result of the 1918 general election held a month after the armistice had illustrated just how well the fortunes of Sinn Fein had been revived when seventy-three out of a 105 Irish seats were taken at the expense of the old Nationalist Party which wanted Home Rule. Of the seventy-three Sinn Fein MP's there were thirty-six prisoners which more than anything else showed the importance of the prison struggle in gaining the sympathy of ordinary Irish people.⁸²

This was also proved by Fianna Fail later in the decade when it managed to get elected using the banner of "*Free the Prisoners*". However, this did not prevent de Valera from locking up his old comrades when it suited him to do so.⁸³

Another of the more famous prisoners to go down the path of the hunger strike was Terence McSwiney, the Sinn Fein Lord Mayor of Cork, who died as a result of starvation on the seventy-fourth day of his fast in Wormwood Scrubs Prison in October 1920.⁸⁴ His death was very important to the republicans as his case attracted sympathy for Sinn Fein and was an important propaganda weapon against the British during the Black and Tan war. One can argue that the prisons dispute at this time could have played an important role in the gaining of Irish independence. In fact Gerry Adams argues that the death

82 Kevin Kelley. *THE LONGEST WAR*. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1990, 35.

83 Coogan, (1980), 20.

84 Bell, (1972), 36.

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of Ashe proved to be a turning point in the struggle for Irish independence.⁸⁵

After the Twenty-six Counties had become a self governing dominion known as the Irish Free State and the pro-treaty forces had won the Irish civil war, it fell on the Irish to imprison their former comrades in arms. This was due to the Free State's legitimate fear that the IRA would reorganize upon the release of its members from gaol. It also left Sinn Fein without most of its members, and although a legal party it found itself unable to function well politically.⁸⁶

This resulted in the concentration on a prison campaign by republicans. After the civil war the political activity that Sinn Fein could indulge in was very limited. However this meant that the prisoners release campaign, headed by Maud Gonne MacBride, was extremely vigorous to say the least.⁸⁷

The republicans at this time were hoping to achieve three aims according to Bell in his book *The Secret Army*.

1. The release of IRA prisoners.
2. To strengthen and develop Sinn Fein's political machinery to capture control of local bodies.
3. To reconstruct and build up an invisible machine for the IRA that may be used in a more terroristic manner amongst the civil population rather than as a conventional field fighting force.⁸⁸

85 Gerry Adams, (1987), 71.

86 Kelley, (1990), 53.

87 Bell, (1972), 59.

88 Ibid, 59.

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The campaigners concentrated on both the use of the law and the conditions in which the prisoners were held. However the Free State government, under William Cosgrave, would not listen to the representatives of a movement which wanted to subvert it. In order to gain the release of IRA men in prison, the prisoners decided to go on a mass Hunger Strike. The strikers numbered 425 people including ten TD's (Teachta Dala, Member of the Dail) at Mountjoy Prison. In total the republicans claimed that there were about 8000 men on strike nation wide. The campaign outside the gaols also intensified in tandem with the strike. However, not everyone's temperament was able to sustain such a test, and inevitably the strikers soon reduced in number, which resulted in great tension between the different prisoners. This led to a number of defections and also meant that the strike was doing more harm than good for the republican cause.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, outside the prisons the campaign was stepped up by MacBride. The campaign used parades and other forms of peaceful protest. However, as the strike collapsed with only a few hundred protesters, they began to divide between themselves while the government was determined to refuse to give in to the prisoners.

Some of the hard-liners in the prisons like Paedar O'Donnell refused to give up. The strike reached its inevitable conclusion when in November 1923 Denis Barry and Andrew Sullivan died as a result of their fast. The mixture of deaths and defections mixed with government intransigence led to the calling off of the strike on the

89 Ibid, 60.

23 November. Soon afterwards the government felt strong enough to begin the release of the prisoners in small batches.⁹⁰

The results of the prison hunger strikes at the start of what are known as the first "troubles" were very mixed for republicans but this did not prevent the physical force tradition in Irish politics from using this tool repeatedly often without regard for the consequences of their actions.

After de Valera's victory in 1932, the IRA prisoners held in the Free State were released. However, when the IRA threatened his hold on power he proved to be a formidable opponent.⁹¹ He was prepared to imprison them, or in the case of the murder of Garda officers, execute the perpetrators. Sean MacBride proved an impressive campaigner for prisoners rights using *Habeas Corpus* proceedings to gain the release of many republicans.

The greatest defeat suffered by de Valera was at the hands of a fellow 1916 veteran Patrick McGrath, who gained political status and was subsequently released in deference to public opinion after a forty-three day hunger strike in December 1939. This was probably the most successful of all hunger strike campaigns run by the IRA. The success was only a short lived experience since a few weeks later the IRA directly endangered Ireland's security and threatened de Valera's policy of neutrality in World War Two. It achieved this by raiding the Irish Army's ammunition depot and stealing most of Ireland's

90 Peadar O'Donnell, **THE GATES FLEW OPEN**. Cork: Mercier Press, 1965, 97-103.

91 Coogan (1980), 25.

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military weaponry. This led to the Justice Minister, Gerald Boland, being appointed to the task of crushing the IRA, using all means at his disposal. With popular support for this move, the prisoners were given short shrift whenever the campaigners managed to get around the censorship which surrounded the prisons during the War.⁹²

The republican prisoners who found their political status removed from them, immediately went "on the blanket" and refused to put on a prison uniform. They decided to embark on an offensive refusing to accept any facet of criminalisation. Throughout the war the prisoners endured appalling conditions which eventually led to a hunger strike in 1946. After nineteen days the striker, Sean McCaughey, increased the pressure on the government by choosing to refuse water, which led to his death twelve days later. The inquest into his death meant the public disclosure for the first time since 1939 of prison conditions. As a result the republican Prisoners Release Association was founded, which campaigned for the release of all IRA prisoners throughout the British Isles. The organization proved to be a spring board for recruitment by the physical force republicanism in the post-war years.⁹³ The 1950's and 1960's proved a relatively quiet period in the prisons and it was not until the early 1970's that the prisons had another hunger strike, led by the newly mutated organization, the PIRA, who chose to use the prisons issue as a weapon

92 Ibid, 26.

93 Ibid, 27.

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against the latter-day inheritors of Lloyd George's legacy in London.

In 1972, William "Billy" McKee led the Provisionals first, and arguably most successful, hunger strike while being held in Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast. The objective was the granting of political status by the authorities.⁹⁴ The new direct rule Secretary of State was William Whitelaw, a politician who was inexperienced in dealing with terrorism, and the situation in Northern Ireland (as was the whole Cabinet). This political naivety led to the instigation of negotiations between PIRA and the government, which were held at the home of a Junior Minister under Whitelaw (Paul Channon) in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.⁹⁵ One of the reasons for the talks was Whitelaw's fear that Billy McKee would soon die (this was not directly a problem, but the fear of rioting after McKee died was an important worry for Whitelaw). Ultimately the talks collapsed with the republicans gaining "special status", a British euphemism for political status, while Whitelaw gained time through the temporary cease-fire to start a political process leading ultimately to the Sunningdale agreement of 1973.

However, whatever the reasons behind the granting of political status, it is with some justification that Gerry Adams uses this incident as proof that the use of the prisons as a viable weapon that could gain victory for PIRA and PSF, in both achieving concessions from the government, and in local terms, gaining the support of

94 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 225.

95 Ibid, 71.

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people who would not normally vote PSF in both the Republic and the North.⁹⁶

The later hunger strikes run by the Provisionals had somewhat more mixed results and illustrated the dangers to a movement which indulged in the hunger strikes, a lesson that was not lost on Bobby Sands in 1981, the man who was the Officer Commanding in the H-Blocks during the first hunger strike in 1980 and went on to become the first of the 1981 strikers to die.⁹⁷ This was illustrated by his statements, which put forward the fear that the strike, if beaten, could destroy the republican movement, or at least destroy the future of an individual. An apt example of this is the fast of Sean MacStiofain (John Stephenson) a former Chief of Staff of the PIRA.

His fast lasted fifty-seven days during 1972 but was abandoned, he claims, on the orders of the Army Council. There has, however, been some dispute over whether this is true, and the episode destroyed his reputation within republicanism, since the PIRA has no place for failed martyrs.⁹⁸ Later hunger strikes were somewhat more successful. In 1973 the two Price sisters, convicted for a car bombing in London, fasted for approximately 200 days, frequently being force fed in order to keep them alive, as part of their campaign to be repatriated. This was eventually rewarded with a return to Ulster in order

96 Gerry Adams, (1987), 71.

97 The IRA's manual the GREEN BOOK states in General Order No7, that "*Volunteers are forbidden to hunger strike without the express sanction of General Headquarters*", for this very reason.

Martin Dillon, (1990), 488.

98 Beresford (1987), 22.

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to serve out their sentences nearer home.⁹⁹ The following year there was a further strike in the mainland but after a change in government, Labour returned to power with experience of the North from the start of the "troubles". They seemed far less susceptible to the emotional blackmail of a hunger strike. The first striker, Michael Gaughan, died from a mixture of pneumonia and complications from force feeding.¹⁰⁰ It is believed that this incident led the government to abandon this policy and ratify the Tokyo Medical Convention which stated that force feeding should not be practiced.¹⁰¹ Frank Stagg, who was in on the 1974 strike but came off after Gaughan's death- having received promises of repatriation- fasted again in a series of unsuccessful strikes when the promises remained unfulfilled. He eventually died in February 1976 after a sixty-two day fast¹⁰². This death marked the end of one phase of the prisons dispute and perhaps predicted the end of the next phase at the same time.

The British government chose in 1976 to abandon special status and elicited the response from newly convicted prisoners which they must have expected. The new prisoners immediately went "on the Blanket" by refusing to put on prison uniform, as part of a campaign to resurrect their old political status and in rejection

99 Ibid, 22.

100 Ibid, 23.

101 *THE POLITICS OF TERROR, INTELLIGENCE DIGEST*.
Cheltenham, Glos: Intelligence International Ltd, Digest
No 80, June 1981.

102 Beresford, (1987), 23.

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of criminalisation in a campaign that was to end with the 1981 hunger strike.

Meanwhile in the Irish Republic (Poblacht na hEireann) the PIRA prisoners held in Portlaoise Prison were also were campaigning for the right to be held as prisoners of war. The prisoners objected to what they thought was excessive security and harassment by the prison warders and Gardai. This included regular strip searching of prisoners by warders (including the manual opening of buttocks and close inspection of testicles) in an attempt to find explosives. The security had started after the escape of prisoners using explosives from the gaol in August 1974, along with the similar escape of five remand prisoners from the Special Criminal Court in Dublin in August 1976, and an attempted escape where a prisoner was shot dead in 1975.¹⁰³

In 1977, this heavy security resulted in a hunger strike, starting on 7 March, demanding an end to prison brutality and nine points: the right to free association; an end to degrading and humiliating strip searches; an end to solitary confinement; open and respectable visits; the right to engage in craft work; the right to educational facilities; adequate recreational facilities; exercise facilities; and the right to communicate with the legal adviser of their own choice.¹⁰⁴

The fast was embarked upon by twenty prisoners which lasted for forty-seven days ending on the 22 April 1977. It is curious that the end of the fast was similar to the

103 Coogan, (1988), 525-534.

104 *HUNGER STRIKE*. Dublin: Sinn Fein (Provisional), 2a Lower Kevin St, 7 March 1977.

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deal at the end of the strikes of the early 1980's in the North in that it ended with the intervention of the Roman Catholic Church. A further similarity was that the prisoners never had a deal agreed officially with the authorities. The Republic's government simply introduced new changes that fulfilled the demands once the strike had ended.¹⁰⁵ This allowed the situation in the North's prisons to become a priority of the POW dept of PSF and gave republicans a precedent to follow in the fight against criminalisation during the 1976-1981 prison dispute.

105 David Reed, **IRELAND THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION**, London: Larkin Publications, 1984, 306.

CHAPTER III
THE PRISON DISPUTE FROM 1976
TO 1980

3a. INTRODUCTION.

The hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 were the culmination of a campaign for what PSF described as "political status" which had begun in 1976. In order to understand the reasons why the prisoners felt that it was correct to fast to the death, the period of the "blanket" protest, and its development, must be studied.

The aims of this Chapter are to catalogue the gradual escalation of the protest over the years and examine the reasons behind the dispute. Firstly, in 3b the origins of the fast and the reasons why the British chose to abandon special category status are explained. Then in 3c the case of the protesters and the British government in international law is examined, as are the reasons why prisoner's living conditions deteriorated and the prison protest developed.

3b. SPECIAL CATEGORY STATUS.

It is somewhat ironic that the history of special category status prisoners should begin and end in a hunger strike. Another irony was that the 1971 and 1980/81 hunger strikes were directed against a Conservative government that at each time had been relatively inexperienced in Northern Irish affairs.

In 1970 the Labour party lost the General Election and handed over power to the Conservatives under Edward Heath. At the time the Conservatives were still formally

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linked to the Ulster Unionists. This led to the army being given a free hand in the Province for the first time.¹ There followed a series of regrettable incidents where the army over reacted in nationalist areas. These incidents included such cases as Bloody Sunday (when an unarmed anti-internment demonstration was fired on by troops in Londonderry on 30 January 1972, resulting in thirteen deaths). This was manna from Heaven to the newly formed Provisionals, who at that time were trying to establish themselves as the inheritors of the old IRA. Allegations of army brutality were an ideal weapon for gaining recruits and support in the nationalist ghettos, where the population initially saw the troops as liberators. But, as the army began to act against Catholics, with at times excessive force, nationalists began to change their attitude and instead looked upon the soldiers as latter-day Black and Tans.² It must be emphasised that the Provisionals did what they could to promote this image and as they studied the past for inspiration decided that perhaps this was the time to start a prisons campaign in an attempt to gain political status from the authorities, and increased civilian sympathy.

In 1971 William "Billy" McKee went on hunger strike and demanded concessions from the government on the position of PIRA prisoners which amounted to "political status". William Whitelaw, the newly appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, feared serious rioting if

1 Tim Pat Coogan, **THE IRA**. Glasgow: Fontana, 1988, 438.

2 Ibid, 438.

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McKee died, and decided to give in to the demands of the prisoners. The result was a different prison regime for convicted terrorists in Northern Ireland, which was termed officially as special status.³ This was introduced with the support of the Labour Party and gave the prisoners similar rights to those normal prisoners of war would expect to receive.⁴

In *On the Blanket* Coogan describes in four points the rights of special category prisoners. They were:

1. The right to wear their own clothes.
2. The right to abstain from penal labour.
3. The right to free association within their own prison area.
4. The right to educational and recreational activities in conjunction with the prison authorities.⁵

Since the start of special category the prisoners had won a further eleven concessions from the government which ranged from the recognition of a paramilitary command structure, and the right of the PIRA prisoners Officer Commanding (OC) to vet the prison staff who were to be in direct contact with the prisoners, to the issuing of billiard tables and televisions in the prison huts.⁶

This led to a regime that permitted PIRA and the other paramilitary organisations to train and teach their

3 Patrick Bishop & Eamonn Mallie, *THE PROVISIONAL IRA*. London: Corgie, 1989, p 225.

4 HANSARD (FIFTH SERIES) VOL 905, COMPRISING PERIOD 9TH TO 20TH FEBRUARY 1976, London: Hansard, 1976, Col 1077.

5 Tim Pat Coogan, *ON THE BLANKET-THE H-BLOCK STORY*, Swords, Co.Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 48.

6 Tim Pat Coogan, *DISILLUSIONED DECADES, IRELAND 1966-87*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987, 48.

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imprisoned personnel while they were out of action enabling them to improve the calibre of their volunteers. At the same time it allowed paramilitary prisoners a life style far superior to the normal life of a criminal prisoner.⁷ This made prison a more tolerable and useful experience to both the prisoners and their organisations.

However, the Labour party returned to power in 1974, and with it came a new Northern Ireland Secretary, Merlyn Rees who commissioned, and then implemented, the recommendations of a committee chaired by the Lord Chancellor, Lord Gardiner. In a report published in 1975 Gardiner recommended the abolition of special category status for paramilitary prisoners and concluded that the granting of it had been a mistake.⁸

The Gardiner committee was appalled by the freedoms that were enjoyed by prisoners. They were worried that 71% (1881 out of 2648) of male prisoners in Northern Ireland were housed as special category prisoners. This meant that the prison was not able play its expected role in the rehabilitation of the offender.

There are no facilities for organised employment. Each compound is virtually a self-contained community which keeps the premisses it occupies to such a standard as it finds acceptable and engages, if it so wishes, in military drills or lectures on military subjects.⁹

7 Thames T.V showed a documentary on the 22 September 1977 under the title **LIFE BEHIND THE WIRE**, which showed loyalist (UDA) prisoners receiving firearms and Bomb making lessons and contained evidence of similar abuse by PIRA prisoners of special category status privileges. **TIMES**, 22 September 1977.

8 Merlyn Rees, **NORTHERN IRELAND-A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**. London: Methuen, 1985, 275.

9 Lord Gardiner (chair), **REPORT OF A COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER, IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS, MEASURES TO DEAL WITH TERRORISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND**, London: H.M.S.O, 1975, 33.

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Needless to say, the committee did not feel that this was an appropriate way to run a prison. They felt that the authorities should exert greater control in a cellular prison like the one being built as the Maze Prison on the Long Kesh site. But the way prisoners were treated meant they expected a general amnesty soon. Consequentially, the sentences handed out by the courts had lost their deterrent effect. This led the committee to say.

Although recognising the pressures on those responsible at the time we have come to the conclusion that the introduction of special category status was a serious mistake.

The committee then went on to say that the "*first priority should be to stop admitting new prisoners to special category.*"¹⁰

When Rees explained the reasons for the abandonment of special category status prisoners to the House of Commons it was in the context of a package of reforms on the 16 February 1976, entitled the Northern Ireland (Treatment of Offenders) Order which included; increasing one-third remission to one-half remission, bringing parity with remission elsewhere in the UK.¹¹ This dressed the announcement as standardisation with the rest of the UK. In his speech he also stressed that the abandonment of internment had played a role in the abolition.¹²

*All those in prison in Northern Ireland are in Prison by the due processes of the law. They are not there by executive action. They are not there by decisions taken uniquely by myself and it is in that clearer situation that I have felt able to deal with this matter.*¹³

10 Ibid, 34.

11 Rees, (1985), 275.

12 HANSARD, 16 February 1976, Coll 1077-1078.

13 Ibid

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He also emphasised that another important factor in making his decision was the restoration of control in the prisons to the authorities, allowing the prisons to play their role by preparing prisoners for normal life again by ensuring that they worked and earned any privileges they might receive. This was resolving the situation that the Gardiner Committee had criticised above.¹⁴

The new policy was dubbed "criminalisation" and it can be argued that it filled the gap in "Ulsterisation", the policy of police primacy and "normalisation", which Rees followed as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The special treatment of paramilitary prisoners was contradictory to the attitude that Northern Irish "troubles" were essentially criminal as opposed to guerilla warfare. Further, special status gave the paramilitaries, and especially the Provisionals, a false legitimacy.

In his autobiography Rees states that the abandonment of internment together with "Ulsterisation" and the phasing out of special category status were combined, and a direct result of the Gardiner report.

I considered what use I should make of the report and decided to make a statement to parliament in the early New Year that if there was an enduring cease-fire, I would announce a phasing out of detention by the end of 1975 or mid 1976, together with a phased reduction in the role of the army and an increase in the role of the police. I would also announce the end of special category status, along with a new parole scheme.¹⁵

He intended to combine this with a political initiative following the Feakle talks of 1974 when some leading

14 Ibid.

15 Rees, (1985), 155.

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Protestant Churchmen had held talks with PIRA leaders in an attempt to start a new initiative. This had led to direct contacts between London and the PIRA, that resulted in a cease-fire in February 1975.¹⁶ This led Rees to contemplate a political convention where PSF would be permitted to attend.¹⁷

However, the political initiative and the cease-fire failed. This left Ulsterisation and "criminalisation" as the basic tenets of Labour party policy until 1979 when normalisation finally ceased to be a viable aim in an extremely abnormal situation. The abandonment also resulted in the "blanket" and then "dirty" protests by the Republican prisoners in the gaols. This was perhaps the worst legacy which Rees left his NIO successor when he became Home Secretary. It also left the Conservatives with a political hot potato when they returned to power in 1979, and arguably gave the Thatcher government its first crisis, with the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes.

3c. THE BLANKET PROTEST 1976 TO 1980.

The announcement of the abolition of special category status resulted in immediate opposition. There was some rioting in loyalist areas on the days before terrorist offences were to be regarded as criminal (March 1st 1976). When questioned on this rioting both Rees and his Conservative opposite number, Airey Neave, reaffirmed their determination to phase out special category status, despite any loyalist paramilitary opposition.¹⁸

16 Coogan, (1987), 229-230.

17 Rees, (1985), 155.

18 HANSARD, 1 March 1976, coll 913-915.

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When responding to support from Enoch Powell, who had criticised loyalists for disloyalty to the laws of the country which they claimed allegiance, Rees expressed his frustration with paramilitaries that used the, to him, hypocritical term loyalist when he stated,

What the right hon. Gentleman has just said about loyalty is absolutely correct. There is only one meaning for it, and he always expresses it correctly. That is not always true of others who call themselves loyalists in Northern Ireland.¹⁹

However in the longer term, it was not loyalist but Republican opposition to criminalisation that was to concern the government.

Initially the reaction from republicans was largely vocal, but the opposition from the Provisionals was to become far more robust and led to an assassination campaign directed against prison officers. The first such murder was on 9 April 1976, when Prison Officer (PO) Patrick Dillon was assassinated. This was soon followed in the same month by the killing of PO John Cumming.²⁰ This was the reaction of the traditional physical force section of the older southern based leadership, which was soon to be over-thrown (see above in Chapter II). They did not see much of a role for external mass action along the lines of the protests and political moves which were subsequently to mark the "blanket" protest period. However, events were soon to overtake them, especially from within the prisons.

The first protest within the Maze/LongKesh prison occurred on 14 September 1976 when Kiaren Nugent, a man

19 Ibid, coll 916

20 Coogan, (1980), 152-153.

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convicted for his role in a van hijacking, vowed: "*that they [the prison authorities] would have to nail the clothes to my back*" if he was to be forced into a prison uniform, and thus criminalised.²¹ It was for this reason that he refused visits for eight months, as he would have had to put on his uniform to receive visitors.

In refusing to cooperate with the new regime, Nugent was honouring not only over a century of Republican prison tradition, but also the order issued by the anti-truce Belfast Brigade (dominated by the still imprisoned Gerry Adams) a few days after Rees's Westminster speech of 25 May 1976.²² The Order was explicit in its opposition to the new prison regime, and stated:

*Volunteers of Oglaiigh na hEireann [PIRA] have been instructed that they are not to engage in any institutional schemes under the control of the prison administration. They are further instructed that they are not to wear any clothing provided by the prison administration, even if such clothes are of a civilian type. They will respond only to the commands and directives of their superior officers regardless of the consequences. They are political prisoners and any other imaginary label tagged to them by the British government will make not the slightest difference to that very basic fact... We are prepared to die for the right to retain political status. Those who try to take it away must be fully prepared to pay the same price.*²³

This order was important for two principal reasons in demonstrating PIRA's responses to the end of special category status. Firstly, that the new prison regime was unacceptable and, secondly, that PIRA would launch an assassination campaign against the prison administration,

21 Ibid, p153 & p80.

22 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, THE H-BLOCKS AND THE RISE OF SINN FEIN**. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986, 59.

23 Ibid, 60.

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choosing the easiest victims it could, the prison officers.

In a leaflet the northerners stated their support for Nugent. Keen to see his case supported by the Nationalist community they emphasised his youth and his Belfast identity.

Kieran Nugent is a 19 year old youth from Leeson Street in the Lower Falls area... He is resolute in his demand for political status and we in Sinn Fein support and will fight for this demand to be afforded to all political prisoners.²⁴

The emphasis on the word political in the aforementioned leaflet was not coincidental as they regarded themselves as political offenders and felt "special status" was simply a face saving term for the authorities. In a lecture to prisoners it is interesting that the leadership felt it had to explain to the "blanketmen" themselves what they were fighting for.

To set down in writing everything that political status entails would be virtually impossible, it is much easier to simply say that political status exists at present in the same gaol and within a couple of hundred yards of the H-blocks themselves.²⁵

The fact that many prisoners were not very politically sophisticated can also be seen in another lecture in which they are being informed that the protest could take some time.

"The protest presently being carried out in the H-blocks will continue until the prisoners are granted their rights and reunited with their

24 Provisional Sinn Fein, *THIS IS KIERAN NUGENT*, Belfast: PSF, 20 November 1976.

25 *POLITICAL STATUS*, anonymous typewritten prison lecture, undated (between 1977-80), the original is in the Political Collection of the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

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*comrades sentenced before March 1976 who still retain political status.*²⁶

The case of the Provisionals that the prisoners should receive special treatment was interesting: not only were there precedents for the granting of special prison accommodation; but also, that the situation in the Six Counties is not regarded as normal in the UK or in the Republic. Indeed, the various governments in Ulster since 1922 have needed special legislation to deal with terrorism. Between 1922 and 1973, the Special Powers Act provided the RUC with wide ranging powers of arrest, questioning, detention and internment as well as giving the Home Minister the powers to make regulations which had the force of law.²⁷ Subsequently, following the imposition of direct rule in the Province, one saw the introduction of the non-jury Diplock court and the wide ranging powers of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), that had to be renewed each year by Westminster. This whole array of state power was not used to fight crime argued the "blanketmens" sympathisers, but indicated what a special situation the "troubles" were.²⁸ The fact that the situation was abnormal was not disputed, but this was not a factor in the abolition of special category status. The principal motivations were to restore the deterrent factor to committing violent crime in Ulster. Further,

26 *THE H-BLOCKS: THE PROTEST IN PERSPECTIVE*, anonymous typewritten prison lecture, undated (between 1977-80), the original is in the Political Collection of the Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

27 Kevin Boyle, Tom Hadden, & Paddy Hillyard, *LAW AND STATE, THE CASE OF NORTHERN IRELAND*. London: Martin Robertson, 1975, 39-40.

28 At the founding meeting of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee, one contributor from the anti-PIRA Peace People, Kiaran McKeown, called for emergency status to fit with emergency legislation. Clarke, (1986), 102.

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the government had wished to restore control of the prisons as part of an attempt to return all state institutions back to as near normal a situation as possible. Indeed, the temporary nature of the PTA and the Diplock court's indicated this. In a similar manner it is the long term aim of the government to have the RUC as an unarmed force, the prisons were simply the first stage in a long drawn out policy of establishing police primacy and the use of the criminal courts.

The legitimacy of the republican claim under European or international law was easier to test. The "blanketmen" described themselves as POW's, though in the past they had accepted special status (that is the facilities of the POW without official government recognition of this position) thus they were satisfied to receive treatment as political prisoners without the name. So the Republicans had already demonstrated the fact that they are not necessarily interested in POW status. The status of political prisoner does not exist in British law, unlike in some other countries (such as the former Soviet Union) as the motivation does not change the prison accommodation. Thus a convicted traitor, such as George Blake, although in seclusion for his own safety, was kept in a normal prison, despite the political motivation for his crime. This specific point was made by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in a leaflet released in 1980,

... no prisoner is imprisoned in Northern Ireland because of his or her political beliefs. There are no political prisoners. Every person

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*sentenced to imprisonment in Northern Ireland has been tried and found guilty in a Court of Law.*²⁹

The European Convention on Human Rights further guarantees freedom of expression and the UK is a signatory of this Convention. This means that if there was a person imprisoned in the UK simply because of his/her political beliefs he/she could successfully use the European Court of Human Rights to seek redress. The Extradition Act of 1870 and the European Convention on Extradition of 1957 does permit political offenders to apply for asylum, but the 1977 European Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism covers all offenders whose crimes involve "*cruel or vicious means*". This rejected the possible use of the 1870 Act or the 1957 Convention as a precedent for British recognition of a different status for politically motivated crimes.³⁰

Some "blanketmen" did bring their case to the European Commission on Human Rights which is also discussed later in Chapter IV. The application was based on the European Convention for Human Rights. The four "blanketmen" claimed that they had been subjected to "*inhuman or degrading treatment*",³¹ which was what the UK had been found guilty of after the allegations of torture in the early 1970's. The principal complaint revolved around the treatment protesters received from the authorities. An example of this argument was put across

29 Northern Ireland Office, *H-BLOCKS THE FACTS, ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND*. Belfast: NIO, December 1980.

30 Tom Hadden, *THE BLANKET BRIGADE*. Robert Bell, Robert Johnstone, & Robin Wilson (eds). *TROUBLED TIMES, FORTNIGHT MAGAZINE AND THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1970-91*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991, 42.

31 *GUARDIAN*, 20 June 1980.

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by Gerry Adams in the northerners newspaper *Republican News*.

*Solitary confinement was condemned, as far back as the end of the 19th century, by a British Parliamentary Committee. Today, in Long Kesh, Republican prisoners are held in solitary 24 hours a day without exercise facilities. They are naked, have no contact with the outside world, ... and they can expect to continue in this manner for the foreseeable future.*³²

In 1980 the Commission decided that the British were not guilty of this as the prison conditions were self inflicted by the protesters.³³ Further, it stated that the prisoners could not derive any "legitimacy or justification from the European Convention on Human Rights."³⁴ This judgement was in line with a decision by the Commission on 8 July 1978 in a case brought by the German RAF (*Rote Armee Fraktion*- Red Army Faction) prisoners Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and Jan-Carl Raspe against the *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Federal Republic of Germany). In the German case the Commission felt that prison conditions such as solitary confinement had been brought upon the prisoners themselves by their actions and so were not in contravention of the European Convention on Human Rights.³⁵ This had supported a decision by the German courts in October 1975 that torture by isolation was RAF propaganda because of their

32 "Brownie" (Gerry Adams), *TERRORISM, REPUBLICAN NEWS*. Belfast: Republican Press Centre, 5 February 1977.

33 Kevin J. Kelley. *THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRA*. London: Zed Books. 1988, 325.

34 *GUARDIAN*, 20 June 1980.

35 Alfred Klaus, *AKTIVITAETEN UND VERHAELTEN INHAFTIERTER TERRORISTEN*. Bonn: Bundesministerium des Innern, 1983, 184-196.

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refusal to adapt to prison conditions which meant they had inflicted the situation upon themselves.³⁶

Finally, one returns to the international conventions dealing with the treatment of POW's, principally the Geneva Convention of 1864, and its updates in 1949 and the additional protocols of 1977. The decision over whether one receives POW status lies in the definition of "*legitimate combatant*" which was originally outlined in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. Traditionally one could only be classed as a legitimate combatant if one fulfilled the 1907 rules:

1. That of being commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates.
2. That of having a fixed distinctive sign recognisable at such a distance.
3. That of carrying arms openly.
4. That of conducting their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.³⁷

The PIRA and INLA obviously failed by these rules but the Hague regulations were added to by the Geneva Convention of 1949- that had been called to take into consideration the advances and changes brought to warfare especially by the Second World War. This had created different groups fighting which were not covered by past agreements, but were obviously legitimate combatants (at least so far as the allies were concerned). These included the resistance forces, guerrilla groups and

36 Sebastian Cobler, *LAW, ORDER AND POLITICS IN WEST GERMANY*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978, 131-132.

37 Geoffrey Best. *HUMANITY IN WARFARE, THE MODERN HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL LAW OF ARMED CONFLICTS*. London: Methuen, 1983, 296-298.

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semi-state forces like the Free French under Charles de Gaulle after the official French surrender in 1940.

Further, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) felt that there needed to be some form of conflict regulation in regard to internal conflict. In this century some of the worst wars had been civil wars. This was especially the case with the Russian and Spanish civil wars when all sides had treated prisoners abominably. As early as 1912, at its international conference there had been calls for ICRC to be involved in civil conflict, but the Russian delegates led the refusal saying "*insurgent bands or revolutionaries... can only appear in the eye of the law as criminals*". By 1949, it had become clear that non-international wars had to come under some form of regulation. But due to the sensitivities of nations facing this situation the definition of internal conflict was deliberately vague leaving it open to interpretation. The limited protection went to "*persons taking no part in the hostilities*" or lawful belligerents who obeyed the rules of law (PIRA does not qualify as it refuses to do so), although the ICRC was permitted to offer its services to parties in the conflict as an impartial humanitarian body.³⁸ Obviously under this definition the Provisionals could not claim any protection from international convention. Though this convention did open the way to the brief and unsuccessful attempt to mediate between the hunger strikers and the authorities in 1981.

38 Ibid, 299-300.

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The additional protocols of the 1977 Geneva Convention did offer interesting possibilities in support of the republicans' case for different treatment. These 1977 protocols were to include a new status of legitimate combatant. This had been inserted by some developing countries which had their origins as guerilla fighters. The new protocol declared that guerrillas or freedom fighters had only to distinguish themselves by producing weapons immediately before going into action.³⁹ However, the UK (along with most other western countries) refused to ratify these protocols, and even if they had terrorists were still explicitly excluded from the status of combatant. Further, the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland would refuse to be governed by the section of the protocols which states that they must not undertake the killing, injury or capture of adversaries by "*feigning civilian, non-combatant status*". They would also refuse to observe the laws and customs of war, as this would curtail too many of their operations.⁴⁰ Examples of the rules of war being broken would be the PIRA's refusal to take prisoners or the targeting of former members of the security forces. So even if the 1977 protocols are ever ratified by the British government the PIRA will remain outside of this coverage because of their refusal to obey the normal conventions of warfare. This meant that the republican prisoners were going to have to win the right of political status themselves.

39 Hadden, (1991), 42.

40 Best, (1983), 326-330.

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The views of the other political parties about the abolition of special category had been initially generally favourable. Gerry Fitt, the leader of the largest Nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), was very positive in his reaction to the announcement in the House of Commons⁴¹. However, by 1978 Fitt left the SDLP in part due to the prisons issue. Without his influence and that of other socialists (like Paddy Devlin) the party became increasingly nationalist in its outlook, although it remained hostile to violence. This meant that the SDLP and its new leader John Hume took the middle ground, and tried to square the circle.

*The SDLP has taken the consistent view that the only punishment to which a prisoner should be subjected is the deprivation of liberty. All other punishments are in danger of infringing basic humanitarian conditions in prison.*⁴²

In plain terms they were embarrassed by the possible political mileage that the Provisionals might gain at their expense. So like the Catholic Church they pressed both sides to compromise, using the terminology of liberalism. A similar criticism came from the Protestant law lecturer and former editor of the liberal magazine *Fortnight*, Tom Hadden, who argued that the punishments which the protesters were suffering were too severe and could be counter-productive in the longer term.⁴³

The journalist Liam Clarke says that the government's principal mistake at this time was to concentrate on the wearing of prison uniform as the main

41 HANSARD, 1 March 1976, Coll 913-915.

42 John Hume, *STATEMENT BY MR JOHN HUME*. Belfast: Social Democratic and Labour Party, 38 University St, Belfast. 30 October 1980.

43 Hadden, (1991), 41-42.

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tenet of its new penal policy.⁴⁴ The government had initially hoped that the deprivation of clothing to prisoners might deter them from going on a "blanket" type protest. In fact the majority of prisoners had chosen to conform to prison rules.⁴⁵ Although this was probably as much to preserve their rights to 50% remission of sentence as to avoid the discomfort of just having a towel and blanket as clothing.

The spectacle of men first refusing to wear clothes and then embarking on the "dirty" protest (non-use of washing and lavatory facilities), made for very harrowing material for the propagandists in PSF's POW department. The bearded, long haired and pale protesters looking Christlike were portrayed in portraits upon wall murals in nationalist areas. Although initially the protest did not attract much support, Provisional propaganda led to the development of widespread sympathy for the protest in Nationalist areas of Ulster, as well as attracting sympathy in the Irish Republic, from a far wider public than normally attracted to extremist republicanism. This bore echoes of sixty years previously, when, during the Irish War of Independence, the prisons issue had played a role in causing Sinn Fein to become the principal representative of nationalist politics at the expense of the old Irish Nationalist Party. The recreation of this

44 Clarke, (1986), 62.

45 According to NIO figures on the 6 October 1980, protesting male prisoners were housed in three H-Blocks at the Maze while five H-Blocks and prisoners located in other parts of the Province were conforming to regulations.

Northern Ireland Office, *H-BLOCKS, THE FACTS*. Belfast: NIO, October 1980.

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position for PSF seemed possible again, a factor that would not have been lost on the newly emergent northern leftist leadership in the PIRA. The new leaders had always faced the problem of the PSF being the smaller Catholic party in both the South and in the North where the moderate SDLP still held sway in the ballot box.⁴⁶

The protest by the prisoners was sparked off by the abandonment of special category status. It was the attempt to win back these rights that was the priority of the protest, despite any developments outside the Prison compounds as its result. The demands which were to remain largely the same throughout the protest were;

1. The right to wear their own clothes.
2. The right to abstain from penal labour.
3. The right to free association.
4. The right to educational and recreational activities in conjunction with the prison authorities.
5. Lost remission restored (ie. that prisoners who had lost remission of their sentence due to taking part in the protest, should have remission restored).⁴⁷

The direction which the protest took, rather than being an organized strategy, was haphazard and largely based on the precedents set by Nugent's individual actions. The motives behind this protest were dictated by two principal factors. Firstly, a desire to break one leg of what republicans saw as a three point attack against

46 See Appendix II, Table II.

47 Coogan, (1980), 48.

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them by the authorities; Ulsterisation, normalisation and criminalisation. Secondly, the average PIRA "Volunteer" thinks of himself or herself as a soldier and so would regard with venom any attempt to be branded or classed as ordinary criminals.⁴⁸ This leads to the act of forcing a prisoner to wear a prison uniform being imbued with a significance that would mystify any outside lay observer. For the PIRA prisoners the uniform in one gesture rejects any recognition of the prisoners position as a political prisoner of war and reduces the "freedom fighter" to the level of a common criminal. The uniform also dehumanises the individual, making him part of a group and therefore more susceptible to pressure.

This would perhaps explain the level of personal feeling directed by prisoners against the new regime, and lead to an understanding of the sentiments behind statements like Nugent's "*nailing the clothes to my back*". The protest was very much the prisoners, with most of the drive and much of the direction coming from inside the prisons. This was to cause great difficulty to the republican leadership outside when it attempted negotiations with the government later on in the protest.⁴⁹

Outside the prison PIRA continued to conduct its assassination campaign against the prison warders during 1977. This was the principal effort by the republican movement outside in support of the protesters.⁵⁰ Other

48 Ibid, 79.

49 Coogan, (1990), 612-614.

50 During 1977 there were two further assassinations of prison officers those of Wesley Milliken on the 22 June and D.E.Irvine on the 7 December.

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outside action was run by PSF and the H-Block supporters' groups, which largely took the form of demonstrations and rallies within Ireland, that were less well attended by the public, than the campaigners and prisoners might have wished. This led to the "blanketmen" feeling neglected by the Catholic population at large, who refused to take the protest as seriously as the campaign against internment.⁵¹ Initially the prisoners thought that there was some form of awareness in their community of their situation, but gradually they realised that this was not the case. One PIRA prisoner remembered the early phase.

We were under twenty-four hour lockup because of the protest, and we only got out for Mass. It happened to us at the Mass two weeks in a row. The priest was blathering away. He was saying things like, 'When you are mixing with one another, having conversation out in the yard or canteen or over a cup of tea during free association, think about this or think about that moral issue.' We were all looking at each other! Sitting like madmen with hair down here... Hear's us: 'Hold on a here, wait a minute. We don't get free association, we're the "blanketmen". '... everybody that evening was up to the doors shouting: 'Nobody knows we're here; nobody knows what's going on.'⁵²

Within the H-Blocks tension was rising between the warders and prisoners. There was considerable and understandable resentment amongst prison officers towards the prisoners because of the assassination campaign being conducted against them. A further factor was that the prisoners were compiling the lists of names and addresses of warders for assassination, and it is likely that the

JUNE DIARY, FORTNIGHT, July 1977, & TIMES, 27 November 1977.

51 Hadden, (1991), 41-42.

52 Allen Feldman. FORMATIONS OF VIOLENCE, THE NARRATIVE OF THE BODY AND POLITICAL TERROR IN NORTHERN IRELAND. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 159-160.

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officers suspected that this was the case.⁵³ This exacerbated the traditional tribal enmity between the largely loyalist officers and the republican Prisoners. Often this hostility allegedly led to brute force being used against the prisoners at the slightest provocation—a form of revenge against the PIRA and INLA prisoners for the actions of their comrades outside.

This scenario, claim republicans, led to the protesters becoming increasingly fearful of physical attack, such that by March 1978 most were refusing to leave their cells even to wash. They were initially given wash-basins in their cells with which they could clean themselves but they demanded the installation of shower units, which was refused by the authorities.⁵⁴ The result of this was the launching of the next phase— the "no wash" protest. Another version of the origins of this phase holds that the principal reason for the "no-wash" protest was that the authorities decided, in an attempt to increase pressure upon the prisoners, to designate the prisoners blankets as prison property. This had the effect of depriving the prisoners of the blankets outside of their cells, leaving them with only their towels with which to cover themselves. When the authorities only permitted one towel per prisoner it meant that after the protesters went to bathe they had to go naked when drying themselves. The "blanketmen" complained that this led to humiliation from the warders and the prisoners in the conforming Blocks.⁵⁵ Finally, the government version of

53 Ibid, 197-198.

54 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 82 & 351.

55 Clarke, (1986), 68-69.

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this story says that this was simply an escalation by the protesters of the original protest.⁵⁶

Within the prison the "blanketmen" initially felt that this would quickly bring the protest to a conclusion, but they were soon shown the folly of this idea. Leo Green, first thought that the protest would only last a further few weeks before concessions would bring the protest to a close. However, when he heard an interview on the radio with a doctor it led him to increase his estimates of the time before the government would be forced to give in, as the doctor stated that the human body had its own cleansing system which would enable the body to survive in unhygienic situations. Even so, he states that he did not expect the protest to last longer than a few months.⁵⁷

Inside the prison, relations between inmates and staff continued to decline, a situation which the republican leadership at times encouraged. Pat McCusker, a former prison officer, stated that Brendan "Darky" Hughes had admitted to him that he had ordered a few fights or caused disturbances himself to, "*Keep the hate going, to keep them together*".⁵⁸ This also ensured that there would be a steady stream of stories coming out of the prison from visitors of prisoners who observed their bruises and other visible signs of having been involved in fights with warders.

56 Rees, (1985), 276-277.

57 Leo Green, *ON THE BLANKET, THE CAPTIVE VOICE/AN GLOR GAFA*. Winter 1990, 16.

58 Clarke, (1986), 62.

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The deterioration resulted in a further escalation in the protest to that of the "dirty" protest. When prisoners smeared faeces on the walls of their cell rather than using the latrines provided and poured their urine through the flaps of their cell doors into the corridor.⁵⁹ There is a fair amount of disagreement as to the origins of this phase: the blame for this situation tended to be apportioned according to the political sympathy of the observer.

Republicans claim that the prison orderlies used to collect the "slop" from the latrines in a trolley from cell to cell. Nugent, and other prisoners have claimed the latrines were returned to the cells only half empty by orderlies, and were sometimes kicked over on to the floor intentionally. This left the prisoners with no choice but to throw the excreta out of their windows or through the flaps in their doors.⁶⁰ The prisoners allege that the warders' response was to throw the excreta back into the cells leaving the protesters to smear the faeces on to the walls of their cells using bits of foam mattress or clothing.⁶¹ This version of events has been contested by the British government. One such denial came from the British Ambassador to the United States, Peter Jay in response to statements from *Washington Post* columnist, Jack Anderson, that were critical of British policy in Northern Ireland. In the reply Jay stated that the "dirty" protest was a self-inflicted part of the

59 David Beresford, *TEN MEN DEAD*. London: Grafton Books, 1987, 28.

60 Coogan, (1980), 80.

61 Clarke, (1986), 70.

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prison protest not the fault of the authorities.⁶² In a pamphlet released in 1980 by the NIO titled *H-Blocks The Facts*, the authorities denied that there was any foundation in the allegation's by republicans' concerning ill-treatment in any form of prisoners by the prison officers. This lack of ill treatment was despite the attempted provocations by the INLA and PIRA in their murder campaign against the prison officers. The pamphlet stated that any complaint by the prisoners was investigated thoroughly by the Prison Governor and that any warder found guilty of such maltreatment would be disciplined. It further pointed out that although by the time of its publication twenty-one "blanketmen" had been released, there had yet to be any verifiable evidence of such maltreatment.⁶³

Whatever their origins, the conditions the protesters were now living in were inhuman. Maggots infested the cells where the prisoners lived, slept and ate.⁶⁴ Descriptions by visitors to the Maze during the protest all speak of the revulsion which they felt about the conditions which the protesters endured whether they were self inflicted or not. When the Catholic Primate of all Ireland, Archbishop Dr Tomas O'Fiaich, visited the H-Blocks in August 1978 he described them in a forthright condemnation of the government.

One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being... The stench of rotten food and excreta scattered around

62 Coogan, (1980), 173.

63 *H-Blocks the facts*, NIO, (1980).

64 Bishop & Mallie, (1988), 352.

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*the walls was almost unbearable. In two of them I was unable to speak for fear of vomiting.*⁶⁵

Another observer who has also spoken about the conditions faced by the protesters was a former prison officer, Pat McCusker, who described his first visit to the protesting Blocks rather more crudely and a bit more graphically than the Archbishop.

*The doctor and I had to put on our wellies to go down to it. I was after my dinner and boked my guts up [vomited]. The stink and the stench - there was piddle under the doors and when they opened one of their doors, I'm not exaggerating now, you couldn't see the paint on the door for the shite that was on it.*⁶⁶

The reaction by the authorities to the obvious health and hygiene problems presented by the "dirty" protest was initially to attempt to disinfect the cells using high powered hoses (160 pounds per square inch) and the use of ammonia and bleach disinfectants. The smell and fumes from these led the prisoners to destroy the newly replaced windows in their cells in order to try and ventilate their rooms. They preferred to endure winter temperatures rather than the smell of cleaning agents. The authorities finally dealt with the broken windows by putting in unbreakable fire proof frosted glass. A further problem with the hoses was that the orderlies (largely Protestant criminal prisoners) were none too careful about flooding the cells which led to greater discomfort for the protesters.⁶⁷ At this time the prisoners conditions had become more uncomfortable as the protesters had destroyed all their furniture which was

65 Ibid, 352-353.

66 Clarke, (1986), 70.

67 Ibid, 70.

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not replaced, leaving them only with a mattress, latrine and some religious literature.⁶⁸

As this was obviously unsatisfactory the authorities started the system of wing shifts. Prisoners would be moved from a dirty wing of a prison to a clean one which they would then start to foul, while the soiled wing would be cleaned out using steam cleaning equipment. This would be carried out about once every ten days, and in 1980 at every fourth wing shift the cell would be repainted.⁶⁹ This seemed to control the problems of the hygiene and cleanliness of the prison cells. However, the problem of the protesters' health remained. Apparently the rubbing action of the blanket ensured that the protesters bodies were relatively clean, but their faces soon took on what witnesses described as a sickly grey colour, while their long uncut hair and beards were dirty and greasy. One answer to this was forced washing and hair cutting by prison officers.⁷⁰

The first forced washings took place around Christmas 1978, and according to one eyewitness this resulted in the atmosphere within the protesting blocks became extremely tense.⁷¹ The process of forced washing just became one more point of tension between the prisoners and the authorities. Prisoners would not cooperate with the prison officers so officers would have to use minimum force against the prisoners to perform their duty. This led inevitably to more republican

68 Coogan, (1980), 200.

69 H-Blocks the Facts, NIO (1980)

70 Clarke, (1986), 75-76.

71 Green, (1990), 16.

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allegations of ill treatment by the prison officers. It is probably the case that at times minimum force did descend to the level of heavy handedness, however, this has never been conclusively proven. A description of a forced washing was given by one protester, Liam McCloskey.

A door opened and almost immediately the sound of thuds, slaps, and shouting, and moans and groans. It was Martin Hurson on the receiving end. He was dragged out of the cell to the doctors surgery where he was in a mess. He spent three weeks in the prison hospital recovering from the assault. That morning five men were treated in a similar manner.⁷²

Leo Green, writing ten years after the event gives an equally harrowing account of a forced wash.

Six or eight of them [Prison Officers] would rush the cell, pin the two men to the floor and kick and punch them. Then they'd drag each separately down the wing to the wash area. They went from cell to cell in a systematic fashion.

Green implies that this excessive use of force was in some ways a morale booster to the protesters. *"The noise of each successive beating had made us tense, nervous maybe, but it was [sic] the screws [prison officers] who were the cowards."⁷³*

This concurs with the earlier evidence that the Provisionals, at least in part, consciously chose to try and provoke violence to increase group bonding amongst prisoners to encourage a "them against us" attitude. In 1979 the conditions within the prison deteriorated, although at the start of the year the authorities made a few concessions. In the wake of the case brought by four "blanketmen" to the European Commission of Human Rights

72 Clarke, (1986), 76.

73 Green, (1990), 16.

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the protesters punishment diet was removed, returning the "blanketmen" to the standard prison food. At the same time disciplinary hearings of the "blanketmen" before the Prison Governor, over the protest, were reduced from once a fortnight to once a month.⁷⁴

The principal reasons for the worsening situation were twofold. Firstly, the escalation in the murder campaign by PIRA and the INLA against the prison officers discussed later in Chapter IV. Secondly, the psychological toll that the protest was taking on the "blanketmen" themselves. The protest had by early 1979 been going on for nearly two years and did not seem to be anywhere near resolution. This produced problems of morale amongst the prisoners as they had underestimated the determination of the government to face the protest head on. As the prisoners had hoped that the "blanket" protest would be enough to win, it meant that they realized that they would have to give up or try the tool of the hunger strike.

During the early days, according to Leo Green, the protesters felt that they were near victory. It seemed that all the sceal (news) as the rumours in the republican blocks were known, had stated that international support for their cause would soon bring the British to the negotiating table.

At one point it seemed the American dockers could (and soon would!) dictate all British policy in Ireland. We heard that they supported the men in the H-Blocks and the women in Armagh and would soon boycott all British goods until we were granted political status.⁷⁵

74 Clarke, (1986), 76.

75 Green, (1990), 16.

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Sometimes the search for good news meant that prisoners became easy material for practical jokers.

For days we pondered the rising up of dockers all over the world on our behalf till someone spiked the latest sceal that the Swiss dockers had joined the smash H-Block bandwagon with the revelation that Switzerland was landlocked.⁷⁶

By 1979 there did not seem to be any solution in sight. The NIO with Roy Mason as Secretary of State, seemed bullish in the extreme about the war with PIRA and therefore did not look kindly upon any republican prison dispute. This led the PIRA, in alliance with the INLA, to step up the murder campaign against the prison officers at the expense of the main campaign against the security forces. Tim Pat Coogan has speculated that this was due to requests from the prisoners to organize some form of pressure on the authorities from outside the prison. However, the traditionalists within the PIRA did not want to organize protests in front of army and police surveillance.⁷⁷ It must be remembered that at this time PSF was very much under the control of the PIRA. The southerners only regarded it as a flag of convenience or as a cover. The strong political wing with an independent membership and different priorities did not appear until the 1980's. While PSF's predecessors had in the past used the prisons issue to great effect (see Chapter II)

76 Ibid, 16.

77 In 1979 ten prison employees were killed by the republicans, a fivefold increase in the number of assassinations in the two previous years. This was essentially the response of the traditionalists in the movement, who did not understand the role of politics in their struggle, unlike the newly emerging leadership in the North. However, it was popular with the protesters inside the jail.

Tim Pat Coogan, (1980), 152-153.

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especially during the Irish War of Independence, the later generations of physical force republicans had grown cynical about the role of political action in the struggle. This was probably due to the very recent memories of the split with the OIRA at the start of the "troubles" when they chose to go political. However, as is discussed later, the strategy of mass demonstrations and the use of the "*Armalite and the Ballot Box*" was to prove extremely effective by the end of the protest in 1981. This complete reversal in attitude demonstrated the increasing influence of the urban northerners on the republican movement.

The escalation to the "dirty" protest had finally attracted international attention, especially in the United States, which was not only the UK's closest ally, but also a traditional sympathizer to the Irish cause.⁷⁸ It was perhaps at this stage that the British government could have made a magnanimous gesture towards the protesters that might have solved the prison problem and shown neither side as victorious. A deal could have probably been struck involving the right to wear civilian dress and the restoration of lost remission for the protesters. In the end this was the compromise offered by James Prior in 1981 and it would presumably have been possible to make such an offer at this time.⁷⁹ This would still have left the authorities in control of the prison

78 Bishop & Mallie, (1988), 355.

79 In 1980 Cardinal O'Fiaich secured from the relatives of the protesters the concession that the protesters would be willing to make a deal involving civilian clothing and the right to refuse prison work. Clarke, (1986), 120.

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while the protesters would not have had to submit to the indignity of wearing a prison uniform. It is likely that after several years of living in appalling (though self inflicted) conditions the protesters would have grabbed at anything that seemed like a concession. The PIRA leadership would have welcomed a compromise which would have ended what was essentially a dangerous diversion from the organization's *raison d'etre*, the forcible reuniting of Ireland.

This would seem to be supported by the account of the protest within the prison given by Leo Green. In it he describes the atmosphere within H-4 after the murder of two prison officers, (one each by both PIRA and the INLA) which he alleges caused a period of physical ill treatment known as "*an seachtain dona*" (the bad week) amongst the republican prisoners.

On Sunday, when we all came together for Mass in the canteen it was usually like the tower of Babel. That Sunday after seachtain dona, it was more like the tower of Pisa, none of us very sure just how much longer we could we could hang on... The sceal maith, the American dockers, the other optimistic rumours were all, by then an age away.⁸⁰

This desperation inevitably led to the prisoners' thoughts turning to potential escalation of the protest and this inevitably led to the possibility of a hunger strike, a traditional Irish republican weapon of last resort.

When the new year began the chances of avoiding a fast appeared extremely low. The attitudes on both sides were hardening; both were too committed to be flexible. The protest had entered its fourth year when the newly

⁸⁰ Green, (1990), 17.

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appointed Conservative Secretary of State, Humphrey Atkins, rejected the proposed compromise that had resulted from the intervention as a mediator of the newly appointed Cardinal, Tomas O'Fiaich,, after his first visit to the H-Blocks in 1978.

This had led to a debate within the prison as to what the next step should be. This debate also involved the PIRA leadership outside, like Danny Morrison in his capacity as a member of the H-Block committee.⁸¹ The PIRA leadership was in fact hostile to the idea of a hunger strike. Gerry Adams told Bobby Sands (who was now Brendan Hughes's right hand man) that the leadership was "*tactically, strategically, physically and morally opposed*" to a hunger strike.⁸² Furthermore, as PIRA prisoners regarded themselves as disciplined soldiers they would probably not have embarked on a fast without the permission of the Army Council.⁸³ Within the prison however the "blanketmen" were starting to favour a hunger strike, and in the summer of 1980 two Blocks had voted for a strike.⁸⁴

The attitude of the "blanketmen" had been quite clear, this was that conditions were so bad that the idea of death was at times preferable to having to endure the conditions they lived in. Bobby Sands, states this clearly in his posthumously published gaol journal, "...

81 Bishop & Mallie, (1988), 356.

82 Clarke, (1986), 121.

83 PIRA General Order No 7:- Volunteers are forbidden to undertake hunger strikes without the express sanction of General Headquarters.

From the *GREEN BOOK* published as an appendix to; Martin Dillon, *THE DIRTY WAR*. London: Hutchinson, (1988), 488.

84 Clarke, (1986), 76.

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*things became so unbearable that you just couldn't care less whether you lived or died just as long as you could escape the hellish nightmare.*⁸⁵

Leo Green succinctly recollects the motives behind the prisoners' call for a hunger strike. He states that by mid-1980 any illusions the protesters held about the "blanket" protest winning concessions from the authorities had gone, and when the O'Fiaich/Atkins dialogue had collapsed a hunger strike became inevitable. He ends his account with what he regarded as the options available to the prisoners in 1980.

The choice was stark! to sit and hope that a solution would fall into our lap or to go for one final intensification of the fight for political recognition.

*In effect, no choice at all!*⁸⁶

From mid-1980 the protesters began to prepare for a fast to the death, with a request for volunteers sent out by the PIRA OC of the prison, Brendan Hughes. In October, when Hughes learnt of the failure of the O'Fiaich/Atkins talks, the final preparations were made. On the 10 October the "blanketmen" announced that the hunger strike would commence from the 27 October. In a statement they released, their objectives were outlined as a claim for *"as of right, political recognition and that we be accorded the status of political prisoners"*.⁸⁷

Subsequently, the list of names of the hunger strikers were released; it was to be made up of seven men who would start together, in a conscious emulation of the

85 Bobby Sands. *ONE DAY IN MY LIFE*. Dublin & Cork: Mercier Press, 1983, 54.

86 Leo Green, (1990), 17.

87 Clarke, (1986), 123.

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martyrdom of the seven signatories of the 1916 proclamation. In 1980 the names released were Brendan Hughes, John Nixon, Sean McKenna, Raymond McCartney, Tommy McKearly, Tom McFeely and Leo Green.

Despite a last minute attempt at accommodation by the government, which was rejected as too little to late, the hunger strike was embarked upon as planned. This was in the full expectation that some or all of the protesters would die as a result of their fast.⁸⁸

This was despite an extremely lively campaign conducted outside the Maze by what became the National H-Block/Armagh Committee. It was the external campaign that was to produce the high points of the fast in the winning by Maze prisoners of one seat in Westminster and two seats in the Dail during 1981. This campaign is examined in the next Chapter and in Chapters VII and VIII.

⁸⁸ TIMES, 28 October 1980.

CHAPTER IV

REPUBLICAN SUPPORT FOR THE PRISON DISPUTE

4a. INTRODUCTION.

Away from the "blanket" protest within the Maze Prison, there were a number of attempts by Republicans to demonstrate their solidarity with the H-Block prisoners by taking the dispute outside the protesting wings of the gaol and onto the streets.

The campaign could be broadly separated into three subdivisions. These were,

1. The PIRA assassination campaign directed against prison employees (largely warders but also clerks and others within the prison administration) that is looked at in 4b.¹
2. The Provisional Sinn Fein dominated campaign organised through the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and the Relatives Action Committee looked at in 4c, which tried to lobby the authorities on both sides of the boarder by the use of pickets, demonstrations and other forms of legal protest. This culminated in the election of prisoners to Westminster and the Dail Eireann.²
3. The protest at Armagh women's prison examined in section 4d, which claimed to have its own agenda, but was principally a demonstration of solidarity with the male H-Block protesters. This included the

1 Tim Pat Coogan, **ON THE BLANKET**. Swords Co. Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 152.

2 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1986, 101-102.

use of a form of "dirty protest" and eventually an attempted hunger strike led by the Armagh Prison Republican Officer Commanding (OC) and the future Gibraltar bomber Mairead Farrell.³

As was mentioned previously, the protesters in the Maze had been disappointed by the nationalist community's initial reaction to the abolition of special category status, and to the low level of public support that the "blanket" protest had attracted. This had resulted in the prisoners feeling neglected and led to pressure from the prisoners and the relatives on PSF/PIRA to increase the campaign outside the prison. Further more, maintaining morale within the prison was a major problem for the Provisional's leadership. During the days of the Long Kesh Cages, the relaxed atmosphere and paramilitary dominance had ensured that prisoner morale remained high, but in the H-Blocks, where control was firmly in the hands of the authorities, the PIRA leadership was faced with a depressed prison membership.⁴ This probably would have spread throughout the movement as the average volunteer would expect at least one term of imprisonment during membership of the organisation. Initially, it was hoped that the "blanket" protest would maintain morale, but the prisoners made it clear that they needed more support.⁵

3 James Adams, Anthony Bambridge & Robin Morgan, **AMBUSH, THE WAR BETWEEN THE SAS AND THE IRA**. London: Pan, 1988, 139.

4 Keith Bryett and Joanne Wright, *PROPAGANDA AND JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND, TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE*. London: Frank Cass, Summer 1991, 31-32.

5 *Ibid*, 31-33.

The prisoners had lobbied the outside leadership partially to prove that the issue was still alive, but also because they felt that external action would pressurise the authorities to grant the concessions required for the successful solution of the dispute.⁶ Further, as the protest continued into the early eighties the northern left knew that perhaps the issue was the key to gaining the level of electoral support which their new policy of the "Armalite and the Ballot-box" needed. This was demonstrated in two specific incidents during the 1981 Hunger Strike. These were the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-elections, in which Bobby Sands first became elected. Subsequently, his election agent Owen Carron became the constituency's MP, and the 1981 Southern general election several prisoners stood for and two won seats in the Dail Eireann.⁷ However, even before this high point the prisoners had argued that the dispute could help the Republican movement achieve its more general aims.⁸

4b. THE PIRA ASSASSINATION CAMPAIGN.

The PIRA assassination of prison officer Patrick Dillon, was to become the first reaction by the Republican movement to the abolition of special category status.⁹ It was probably the most tragic and certainly the most controversial part of the prison campaign, although with hindsight, the least studied by observers

6 Clarke, (1986), 85-87.

7 The results for the two By-elections in 1981 were victories by Sands with 30492 votes and Carron with 31278 votes. *TIMES*, 11 April 1981, & *IRISH TIMES*, 22 August 1981.

8 Clarke, (1986), 120.

9 Coogan, (1980), 152-154.

after the end of the prison protest. It is sobering to note that over the five year period of the protest lasted nearly twice as many prison officers died than did hunger strikers.¹⁰ Although the prison officers deaths often provoked little reaction outside Ulster, the conditions of the protesters, who would eventually choose to die, became a matter of international concern.

The initial decision to launch the campaign had been the action of the more conservative Southern wing of the PIRA, and represented an attitude more reminiscent of the early 1970's than the latter part of the decade. This wing of PIRA had an ingrained dislike of anything that carried the overtones of going "political". This was partly the result of suspicions following the feuds and splits that the IRA had suffered as recently as 1969. Further more, militarily, the Provisional leadership felt that this form of protest was preferable to Republican demonstrations, as the latter would be subject to monitoring by the security forces, perhaps compromising members who had so far managed to avoid detection.¹¹

The attacks were probably also felt to be a more effective form of outside action by a leadership that had, according to some observers, become "soaked in blood". The level and ferocity of the fighting in the early seventies seemed to have a brutalising effect upon some of the prominent leaders who at times seemed to indulge in violence for its own sake.

10 In the period of the protest eighteen warders (and one wife) were Killed compared to ten hunger strikers: Clarke, (1986), 77.

11 Coogan, (1980) 151.

Assassinating prison warders was also an attempt to pressurise the prison authorities directly by making the job of prison officer less attractive to potential recruits, while also trying to terrorise existing officers into leaving prison work. It is however difficult to assess the effect this had on the warders.

The campaign may also have been intended to tempt officers into taking some form of physical revenge against the "blanketmen". It is certainly the case that the NIO believed this.¹² It was known by the officers that the assassination lists were largely being compiled by the Protestant paramilitaries such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) outside the prisons, and then transmitted via the prisons to Republican inmates, who then compiled assassination lists for the PIRA and INLA.¹³ Prisoners have also claimed that maltreatment frequently occurred after assassinations such as the alleged "an Sauchen donna" incident (discussed in Chapter III). In this case prisoners were said to have been systematically maltreated for a week by prison staff after two officers were assassinated in separate incidents by the INLA and the PIRA.¹⁴ This might have provided evidence for Republican accusations from independent medical experts. This though was never forthcoming and, as outlined in the previous chapter, while there had been some heavy-

12 Northern Ireland Office, *THE H-BLOCKS, THE FACTS*. Belfast: NIO, 1980.

13 Allen Feldman, *FORMATIONS OF VIOLENCE, THE NARRATIVE OF THE BODY AND POLITICAL TERROR IN NORTHERN IRELAND*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. 198.

14 Leo Green *ON THE BLANKET, AN GLOR GAFA/THE CAPTIVE VOICE*. Belfast: PSF-POW dept, 1990, 16-17.

handedness there was no evidence of brutality, so this tactic was not successful .¹⁵

According to one informant the prisoners used the assassinations to torment the warders and try and provoke them. When the officers did not seem too frightened by the threats their wives were attacked instead as one account by a former prisoner illustrates.

" Skelly [a Prison Officer] says to Clinkie [Clarke, a prisoner]: 'What do you want scumbag?'...
Clarke says: 'Hey, got your name down here on the hit list.'
'So what? What do you want me to do?' He knew he was getting banged anyway...
Skelly says: 'I dont give a fuck, send it out'"

Three weeks later the prison officer and Clarke talked again, and Skelly was informed that his name is no longer on the hit list, instead his wife was on the list for letter bombings, this according to the prisoner managed to gain a violent reaction from the officer concerned.¹⁶ This served as warning to officers and was an attempt to intimidate them, as well as illustrating the level of emotion that the protest was causing resulting in the killing of people by the Provisionals who do not normally fit their definition of legitimate targets.

The campaign however ensured the prisoners did realise that the outside movement had not forgotten them and that there was some way in which the Provisionals could get at the prison officers.

It is interesting to note that the assassination campaign did not seem to only target employees of the Maze Prison, but employees of the whole Northern Irish

¹⁵ H-Blocks the facts, (1980).

¹⁶ Feldman, (1991). 197-198.

penal system, regardless of their role in it.¹⁷ The number of attacks also seemed to reflect the level of optimism within the movement for a resolution of the protest. In the early days of the protest the hope of the prisoners was that the NIO would relent fairly easily. At this time the annual number of assassinations was relatively low (in 1976 there were three murders but this dropped to two killings each in 1977 and 1978). However, in 1979 with the prisoners realising that the Government was not prepared to bargain, the number of killings rose (in this year ten warders were murdered). This was a reflection of the frustration felt by Republicans with the authorities and was another way of intensifying the pressure and trying to maintain morale within the protest blocks.

In 1980 the PIRA only killed one warder as it did not want to take press and public attention away from the Maze as a hunger strike began to look increasingly likely¹⁸. The Provisionals also suspended the assassination campaign in March 1980 for a period to help Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Cathal Daly in their negotiations with the NIO Minister Michael Alison. But after the dialogue collapsed the PIRA fired on a prison officer in Belfast in June and then subsequently announced that it was resuming attacks.¹⁹

At the commencement of the hunger strike in 1980, the PIRA decided to scale down the level of violence (see

17 Coogan, (1980), 153.

18 Ibid, 153.

19 David Reed, IRELAND, THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION. London: Larkin Publications, 1984, 323.

Appendix II). This was to ensure that the visiting media who had started to cover the protest in detail for the first time, would not be distracted away from the central issue in the campaign; the blanketmen themselves. In 1981 the PIRA did not resume the prisons campaign, but unlike 1980 did not reduce other activity, in fact violence increased, partly because of the increased tension and the increase in rioting after the deaths of the hunger strikers. It was not until after the fast had ended that they started to go out for revenge as will be discussed in Chapter eight.

4c. THE PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN.

As outlined in Chapter II the period in which the protest lasted was concurrent with the change in PIRA's leadership away from the more conservative and largely southern based older leadership to the so called northern left.²⁰ The new leadership was far more sympathetic to the concept of political action within the "armed struggle". The "blanket" protest was to prove the issue with which this new policy was launched and proved to be a heaven sent opportunity to open up a new battlefield with which to confront the British authorities.

Two groups initially dominated the campaign, PSF and the Relatives' Action Committee (RAC). It is interesting to note that while relations between PSF/PIRA and the RAC were originally good, by the end of the protest the relations between the groups had deteriorated significantly. This is probably due to the problem that while at the start of the protest the two groups shared a

²⁰ Clarke, (1986), 40 - 42.

common agenda by the end of this period the aims of the two groups had diverged significantly. The PSF had started to look upon the protest as the springboard for gaining a foothold in the political process, while the relatives' priorities remained the successful resolution of prison conditions.

The RAC was formed as a result of the controversy that had followed the death of hunger striker Frank Stagg in 1976 . Disagreement arose between some members of his family and the PIRA over his funeral arrangements. The PIRA wished to give him a paramilitary funeral, while the relatives, who blamed the Provisionals as much as the British for his death, opposed this. The end result of this was a farcical dispute over where the body should lie, which led to PIRA disintering the body some months later and re-burying it in a Republican plot.²¹

The fear of repeating this resulted in the Provisionals allowing the RAC to be formed in Belfast in April 1977.²² The RAC was to play an important role in establishing the prison protest as an issue in the Catholic ghettos of Ulster, considering the initially apathetic reaction which earlier PSF organised rallies had received during 1976 and the first half of 1977.²³

The RAC was a relatively new departure for PSF which was traditionally hostile to the formation of political groups outwith its direct control. This was an example of a clear policy shift within the party. It was felt to be

21 For more information on this incident see Clarke, (1986), 86-89.

22 Ibid, 86-87.

23 Kevin J. Kelley, **THE LONGEST WAR**. London: Zed Books, 1988, 262.

important to avoid the mistakes that had occurred with relatives in the past. It was also hoped that it would be useful to broaden out the issue to enable it to become of general concern to the nationalist community as a whole and not just militant Republicans.²⁴

This had been an aim which the northern left had been planning for some time. PSF had chosen at this time to open up contacts and alliances with like minded groups over common issues. An example of this was the Irish Front (IF), a coalition which consisted of the PSF, the IRSP, and the remnants of the old Irish Nationalist Party, it opposed "criminalisation and repression" and sought the restoration of special category status. On St.Patricks day in 1977 the coalition had organised a rally in support of the prison dispute which attracted about 3000 people. The IF though split up shortly after this, largely due to PSF fears of SDLP infiltration.²⁵

This new policy had originally come to the notice of the authorities in the document captured by the Garda Siochana when they raided Seamas Twomeys flat in 1977. The document, which was thought to have been written by a committee chaired by Gerry Adams in the Cages of LongKesh Prison, outlined a new role for PSF. This involved PSF developing a life of its own within the Republican Movement. It also stated that the Provisionals should try and make common issues with like minded groups.²⁶ *"SF [Sinn Fein] should be directed to*

24 Clarke, (1986), 262.

25 Kelley, (1988), 264.

26 Captured staff report published as an appendix to Clarke, (1986), 251-253.

infiltrate other organisations to win support for, and sympathy to, the movement".²⁷

PSF was at all times to under direct PIRA supervision and guidance, there was to be no chance of going totally political. The IF had not been a resounding success, by any analysis, as it did not win any concessions in regard to its role as a pressure group or as a catalyst for attracting the Catholic community's support.²⁸ Its end though came about largely due to PSF intolerance.

This was not the first time the PSF had failed in an attempt to coalesce. As early as 1972 the PSF had formed an alliance with Peoples Democracy (PD). They campaigned under the banner of the Political Hostages Release Committee, but arguments about the legitimacy of PIRA violence caused fragmentation.²⁹ Similarly, in 1976 when they attempted to align again it fell apart. The PD's had by this time built strong links with the Paris-based Trotskyist Fourth International and had a far left ideology. At the time PSF released an arrogant statement.

Sinn Fein will not allow itself to be used to support the meandering politics of PD nor will it allow pseudo revolutionaries to bathe in the glory of Irelands recent dead.³⁰

At this point it is interesting to examine Gerry Adams's interpretation of PSF during this period, in the account he gives in *The Politics Of Irish Freedom*. *"Within Sinn Fein we lacked a structured national political response to the prison crisis... This began to change after the*

27 Ibid, 251-253.

28 Kelley, (1988), 264.

29 Clarke, (1986), 87.

30 Ibid, 87.

1978 *Sinn Fein Ard Fheis*.³¹ So even within militant Republicanism there is the acceptance that politically PSF was unprepared for the dispute which (until the creation of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee) resulted in the leading role of the campaign being taken by the RAC. One of the explanations for this, proposed by Adams, was the nature of Sinn Fein in the North during the days of the Ulster Unionist government in Stormont. In Ulster the party had been illegal unlike in the Republic. This meant that in the Six Counties, PSF, in Adams own words was, "*still emerging from a basically conspiratorial type of organisation*". Further more, republicanism was suffering from a high rate of attrition at this time. Many of the people who had been involved in earlier prison disputes had either abandoned republicanism or were imprisoned, thus depriving PSF of experienced campaigners.³² In the early stages it had released leaflets trying to publicise the campaign by the "blanketmen". An early attempt, *This Is Kieran Nugent*, was released by PSF in November 1976, trying to explain to the nationalist population why the protest had started. It and other attempts were not very successful.³³ As far as most people were concerned the blanketmen were a non-issue. This eventually became apparent to the protesters in the Maze, though initially because they refused visits, the protesters were isolated

31 Gerry Adams, *THE POLITICS OF IRISH FREEDOM*. Dingle Co Kerry: Brandon Books, 1983, 74.

32 *Ibid* 75.

33 Provisional Sinn Fein, *THIS IS KIERAN NUGENT*. Belfast: PSF, Republican Press Centre, Falls Road. 20 November 1976.

from the apathy outside the prison and so were unaware of the indifference to their cause. When they realised that they were forgotten they determined to grab the headlines.³⁴ Thus, much of the behaviour of the prisoners must be seen in the terms of propaganda and self conscious martyrdom with the outside propagandists trying to publicise the events in the Maze.

Originally the RAC was based around Belfast, a factor that was partly a strength in that West Belfast is the most important concentration of nationalists in the North. So the Committee tapped into a very important support base. However, this provincial origin was not an ideal launching pad for a Thirty-two County and an international campaign.

The organisation was undeniably republican in nature, a fact that is obvious from the rules of Belfast Central RAC in which both the short and long term objectives of the campaign are outlined.

Our immediate demand is that political status should be retained and extended to all prisoners who are in gaol because of their opposition to British interference in Irish affairs. We further demand that there should be a total amnesty for all Irish political prisoners. We finally demand the withdrawal of all British troops from Ireland and the re-establishment of a Thirty-two County Republic...

The rules outlined that they would concern themselves with all matters relating to imprisoned republicans, and that Central RAC should mobilise both nationally and internationally.³⁵ Thus, the organisation was in full political sympathy with the aims of PSF/PIRA. The latter

34 Feldman, (1991). 159-161.

35Published as an appendix to Clarke, (1986), 253-254.

therefore did not perceive the largely female RAC as a threat.

The RAC set about the task of pushing their case and publicising the plight of the prisoners with vigour. They organised marches frequently with a symbolic "blanketman" leading the march. As the marches often featured the wives and families of prisoners they provided very emotive propaganda as well as good television pictures. This humanised the protest, bringing home to the general population the conditions in which prisoners lived and so arousing Irish sympathy for the underdog.³⁶

The campaign grew from its humble origins in the Turf Lodge area of Belfast. By the end of 1978 there were branches of the RAC all over Northern Ireland.³⁷ The RAC groups were to become important in militant republicanism's fight against the Peace People, a group of northern women who campaigned against PIRA's violence. This campaign brought out the most intolerant tendencies in the Provisionals, viz a viz their attitude to Catholics who opposed them. The Peace People were confronted through RAC marches titled, Peace with Justice, which tried (and succeeded) to drive the Peace People off the streets in nationalist areas. This was justified by one leading RAC activist Lily Fitzsimons.

Certain people will say that they [the Peace People] should have been allowed freedom of speech. Well we are sick and disgusted listening to their freedom of pro-British speeches seven days a week....

... true they the 'Peace Women' or British agents, as I class them were driven out of Turf

36 Chris Ryder, *THE RUC, A FORCE UNDER FIRE*. London: Mandarin, 1989, 236-238.

37 Reed, (1984), 296.

*Lodge and their car wrecked. We the Irish mothers of Irish children do not want or need them.*³⁸

By the end of 1978 the RAC had grown and matured as an independent, but, republican organization. It picketed Embassies and organised rallies throughout Ireland as the tensions inside the prisons escalated. At this time PSF chose once again to enter into a wider based campaign, despite the previous failed attempts. This was to prove more successful than previous attempts and largely took over many of the roles which had previously been only the RACs. This was eventually officially launched in 1979 as the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and was a direct response, along with the founding of PSF's POW department, to pressure from the prisoners upon the 1978 PSF ard fheis.³⁹ The prisoners hoped for a broad based campaign in the spirit of what Bobby Sands was later to call for. *"Everyone, republican or otherwise, has his own particular part to play. No part is too great or too small, no one is too old or too young to do something".*⁴⁰

This campaign, which was to become a relatively broadbased anti-Unionist coalition, had its origins in the 1978 Coalisland Conference, which had failed largely due to PSF's attitude to parties which would not give unqualified support to the armed struggle. The conference however had prepared the ground for the next RAC . organised meeting in 1979. This was held at the Green Briar Hotel in Andersonstown during October with representation from the RAC and the IRSP, PD, PSF, the

38 Reed, (1984), 295.

39 Adams, (1986), 75-77.

40 The Republican Movement, **NOTES FOR REVOLUTIONARIES**. Belfast: Republican Publications, 1982, 7.

Trade Union Campaign Against Repression, Women Against Imperialism and smaller groups like the Peace People. There were however two important omissions from this conference; the old Officials now named the Republican Clubs/Sinn Fein the Workers Party(SFWP) and the SDLP.

The delegates this time agreed to form a coalition based upon the criminalisation issue which was named the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.⁴¹ The success of this coalition was a direct result of a change in attitude within PSF.

Earlier in 1979, PSF had held its own conference to consider the prison's issue. This was in fact the first time that the party had addressed a single issue, and according to Gerry Adams marked an important new development for the organisation.⁴² The role of the POW department was expanded from that of simply a service for prisoners to that of an active propaganda department, it now began to publicise the prison issue and transformed itself into single issue political campaign in its own right.⁴³ The PSF conference also marked an important maturing of the parties attitude to other sympathetic organisations. Previously offers of support by groups critical of the PIRA had not been taken seriously, but by the time of the Green Briar Conference PSF had come to realise that a policy of "*... critical support was better than one of not supporting at all*". This new political maturity had allowed PSF to play a constructive role in the Conference, while avoiding the mistakes of earlier

41 Kelley, (1988), 317.

42 Adams, (1983), 75.

43 Ibid, 75

attempts at forming coalitions. Thus, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee was formed.⁴⁴ This was to mark a new phase in the prison protest which coincided with the rising tensions within the prisons, making a hunger strike increasingly likely.

The Green Briar Conference was dominated by PSF which sought to have the prisoners' five demands accepted by the Conference. It was at this stage that the possibility of running prisoners as candidates in elections was first discussed. The original idea came from a PIRA Block OC, in the Maze prison, Bobby Sands, who thought that once elected, candidates (or if still imprisoned a co-opted representative) could then sit in a Republican Assembly based on the model of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) General Council. The analogy with the PLO was intentional, as Sands then hoped that an assembly might be the root for PIRA getting international recognition like the PLO. The extent of PSF domination was illustrated when all of its proposals were accepted. However, this served also to polarize the Conference between the Provisionals and the more moderate nationalists in attendance. This was further reflected when PSF became the strongest voice in the seventeen strong committee which was elected.⁴⁵

Subsequently, on the 18 December 1979, a similar conference was held in Dublin. A sub-committee of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee was elected that had responsibility for the co-ordination and expansion of

44 Ibid, 76.

45 Clarke, (1986), 101-103.

activities in the Republic. This, like the Committee in the North, was intended to widen the range of support to include people who did not necessarily support the "armed struggle" or militant republicanism.⁴⁶ This was emphasised by PSF's Vice-President Gerry Adams in a speech to the conference when he stated.

For those who are unable to support the armed struggle in the North there is nothing in the demands put forward by the committee which cannot be supported on humanitarian grounds.⁴⁷

In 1980 the situation within the prison became increasingly tense. In February an incident within the women's prison in Armagh led to the female "dirty" protest being launched. The situation was further exacerbated when in March the Northern Ireland Secretary Humphrey Atkins, announced his decision to remove the right to special category status to people newly convicted of crimes committed before the old cut out date of the 1 March 1976 (offenders after this date were at first the only people "criminalised"). As outlined in the previous chapter, this contributed to the long feared prospect of a hunger strike, which the republican leadership and the relatives were trying to prevent.

Then in June 1980 it was announced that the prisoners last resort before embarking on a hunger strike had failed. Some of the prisoners had taken their case for political status to the European Commission on Human Rights. The 105 page report that had been ruled upon two months previously (but not released until June) decided in favour of the British government though it did

⁴⁶ Reed, (1984), 302.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 320.

criticise some aspects of the prison policy in Ulster.⁴⁸ However, the most important part of the ruling was not favourable to the prisoners who *"cannot derive any legitimacy or justification from the European Convention on Human Rights."* Though the report also stated that,

"... the Commission considers that in such a situation the state is not absolved from its obligation under the convention because prisoners are engaged in what is regarded as an unlawful challenge to the authority of the prison administration."⁴⁹

The report went on to say that the authorities were obliged to reconsider the regime as the prisoners were obviously not prepared to accept it as it stood. This required that Atkins reconsider his decision in order to try and reach a compromise.⁵⁰ Both the protesters and their supporters realised that greater pressure had to be placed upon the government, this inevitably meant a hunger strike.

Within the prison the preparations were made with the requests for volunteers in the late summer and the early autumn of 1980. By Monday the 27 October the names of the hunger strikers were released to the press.⁵¹ Similarly preparations were also made by the H-Block/Armagh Committee for the playing of this final card. With plans being made on the 17 of October for marches in Belfast, and Dublin on the 26. The day before the fast was due to start and then simultaneous to the

48 GUARDIAN, 20 June 1980.

49 Ibid.

50 Kelley, (1988), 325.

51 TIMES, 28 October 1980.

fast starting a press conference was held in London by Charter 80.⁵²

The prisoners themselves sent in ideas to the Committee to try and publicise the protest. This included the attempt to establish an informal news network based on the bush telegraph principal. Friends and relatives were asked to spread information in workplaces etc, they were also asked to send material to friends abroad and put posters up in their windows.⁵³ Former "blanketmen" like Kieran Nugent were also sent abroad to try and increase international pressure upon the British. On 26 October he arrived in Paris with a former Armagh prisoner, Maureen Gibson. They stated that their job was to help form and support European action committees similar to the one in France which had already organised a 5000 signature petition to try and persuade the British Government to accede to the five demands⁵⁴. In the United States the pro-republican Irish-American Groups like the Irish National Caucus and the notorious Noraid (Irish Northern Aid) stepped up their policy of lobbying Congressmen. Internationally H-block prison supporters picketed various British targets including businesses.⁵⁵

Inside Ireland the campaign was built up on a Thirty-two County basis. This was an attempt to force the Irish Republic's Government under the republican minded Taoiseach, Charles Haughey to put pressure upon the

52 Minutes of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee meeting of 17 October 1980, in 30 Mountjoy Sqr, Dublin.

53 H-3 prisoners, *IDEAS TO PUBLICISE THE PROTEST*. A "Comm" smuggled from HMP Maze, Unsigned and Undated but probably pre 1981.

54 *TIMES*, 28 October 1980.

55 Reed, (1984), 342 - 343.

British Government.⁵⁶ A regular column in the northern Magazine *Fortnight*, entitled the *Letter From Dublin*, remarked upon the attitudes of people in the Republic to the Provisionals and the H-Blocks at this time. The columnist noted that people in the Republic were largely in favour of the death penalty for murder, although they also supported the demands of the prisoners (including murderers). The columnist felt that this was largely due to the desire to ignore the protests that the H-Block supporters were putting on, which made people aware of the problems in the North, something most Southerners wished to avoid. In the Republic opinion on Ulster is somewhat contradictory. Most people are in favour of a united Ireland but opposed to the "armed struggle" and the aims of the Provisionals. Similarly most Southern republicans have never been to the North, despite their claimed nationalism. These contradictions were being brought to the attention of Southern opinion by the prison dispute so the impression was that if the British gave in then they could forget about the North again, and the contradictions it inevitably involved.⁵⁷ However, it was not until the 1981 hunger strike that Irish public opinion on the dispute became politically important on either side of the Border; when the issue was used in the Irish General Election and in a series of by-elections in the Westminster constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

56 Joe Joyce & Peter Murtagh, **THE BOSS, CHARLES J HAUGHEY IN GOVERNMENT**. Swords, Co Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1983, 148.

57 *LETTER FROM DUBLIN, FORTNIGHT*, December 1980.

The propaganda, in support of the hunger strikers, was very effectively written, the blame was firmly placed upon the British, anybody who was not involved was further attacked.

The British government needs you if it is to defeat the hunger strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh prison camp. It needs you to bury your head in the sand.

*... it was the British who created the conditions which have led to the present crisis.*⁵⁸

The propaganda also used very emotive language making the prison and the authorities very much the aggressors and the prisoners victims. The leaflets also tried to get people directly involved, "*... the battle for political status is not just the prisoners it concerns all the Irish people.*"⁵⁹

This did lead to pressure being placed upon Humphrey Atkins by John Hume, the leader of the SDLP who met with him on 4 December and afterwards released this statement, "*I believe that it is possible to achieve a step by step de-escalation of the problem which will be satisfying to everyone involved*"⁶⁰

This reflected the growing concern within the nationalist community, including people from outside the normal range of republican supporters. The strike also opened up the possibility for the protesters' case to be heard on the British mainland. This took a far more considered approach, looking and sounding like a human

58 PSF, *H-BLOCK HUNGER STRIKE*. Belfast: PSF-POW Dept, 1980.

59 PSF, *BRITAINS HELL HOLE*, Dublin & Belfast: PSF-POW Dept, 1980.

60 John Hume, *STATEMENT BY JOHN HUME, LEADER OF THE SDLP FOLLOWING HIS MEETING WITH THE SECRETARY OF STATE MR ATKINS*, SDLP, 4 December 1980.

rights group at its founding rally on the 27 September. This was captured even by the name that the propagandists used Charter 80. They had to educate the British public to a greater extent than in the Irish case.

*There are now over 400 prisoners living in appalling conditions in H-Block and Armagh gaol. Most are covered only by blankets, denied all privileges, continually locked in their cells.*⁶¹

The 1980 hunger strike had ended in confusion over the deal that had allegedly been agreed between the protesters and the British Government. What is clear was that the prisoners, their supporters and leaders outside prison were extremely unhappy with the outcome of that strike, and decided that there should now be an all out fast to the death to force the British to change their minds.⁶²

Initially the new hunger strike was to be a solo affair with new strikers appearing every two weeks or so. It was hoped this would increase pressure on the Government. The first prisoner was to be Bobby Sands the prison OC during the 1980 hunger strike.

The eventual decision to re-start the strike was taken by a special PSF conference on the prison protest which was called to start a new political campaign in support of the new hunger strike in which it was realised there would probably be fatalities. At this time plans were also made for a rally in Belfast town centre at the start of the strike.⁶³

61 Charter 80, *HUMAN RIGHTS FOR IRISH POLITICAL PRISONERS*. London: Charter 80, September 1980.

62 David Baresford, *TEN MEN DEAD*. London: Grafton Books, 1987, 52-54.

63 *IRISH TIMES*, 10 February 1981.

During the conference some PSF members had privately expressed reservations about the desirability of a hunger strike. This was because of the fear that after a fifty-three day strike before Christmas 1980, the nationalist population would not be ready, or would possibly even be apathetic to the cause. Further, they had serious doubts as to the likelihood of the Thatcher government giving in to the five demands and that foresaw only pointless deaths and eventual defeat. However, there were still hopes that the government would be prepared to bargain over the principal issues in the protest; clothing and work.⁶⁴

The Provisionals ruling Army Council (AC) was also worried about starting a second hunger strike. The principal problem was that the AC felt that their should not be a repeat of the crisis at the end of the 1980 fast. It also decided that unlike in the 1980 hunger strike there would be no running down of the "war effort" by the PIRA.⁶⁵

In an early show of strength on the 25 February, 700 people attended a pro-H-Block rally in Coalisland Co Tyrone.⁶⁶ This was an attempt to show public support and focus attention upon the Sands hunger strike which was due to start on the 1 March 1981.

On the second day of Sands' strike there was a further rally, in the Catholic centre of Belfast the Falls Road. This attracted about 4000 people. There was

64 Kelley (1988), 330-333.

65 Colm Keena, *A BIOGRAPHY OF GERRY ADAMS*, Cork & Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990, 89.

66 *IRISH TIMES*, 26 February 1981.

press speculation that mass marches were needed, as much to bolster up the morale of the hunger strikers, as to pressurise the government. On the mainland, 10 Downing Street was picketed, while internationally 3000 rallied in New York outside the hotel where Margaret Thatcher was receiving the US Medal of Freedom.⁶⁷

The propaganda campaign was run upon a theme of "Britain Reneges". The leaflets constantly outlined how the British had refused to honour the agreement which brought the 1980 hunger strike to an end.

At the end of fifty-three days of the last hunger strike, with one man hours from death, the government agreed to what the prisoners demanded:- No prison uniform, no prison work, normal remission of sentences, weekly letters and visits, free association with other prisoners and their own educational facilities.⁶⁸

Other material adopted a similar betrayed tone. *"Clothes brought to the gaols by relatives were refused by the authorities and parcels were not allowed."⁶⁹*

Internationally the H-Block issue was raised at a meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Maura McCrory addressed the assembly in her capacity as a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She urged the Commission to investigate post trial treatment of Northern Irish prisoners. The response of the Irish representative was that he felt there were adequate European outlets for prison grievances rather than the UN. The British reply

67 IRISH TIMES, 2 March 1981.

68 AD-HOC HUNGER STRIKE COMMITTEE. London: 1981.

69 National H-Block/Armagh Committee, BRITISH RENEGE ON HUNGER STRIKE COMMITMENTS. Dublin: National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 30 Mountjoy Sqr. 1981.

stated that the prisoners' case was closed when it was rejected by the European Human Rights Commission.⁷⁰

Within the North the campaign to support Sands' fast was meticulously planned. The series of rallies starting in Tyrone were to climax, on the forty-ninth day of the fast, with a mass rally in Dublin. The pressure was further increased when in his fourth week Sands was joined by two new hunger strikers Patsy O'Hara (INLA) and Raymond McCreech (PIRA).⁷¹

The next important development politically was the by-election on 9 April 1981 in the largely nationalist constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The possibility of a prison candidate seemed a godsend and Adams put forward the idea that the candidate should be Sands.⁷² This led to some friction within the National Committee, as one member Bernadette McAliskey (*nee* Devlin) had hoped to run on a prisons ticket. However, this was resolved when on the 26 March, Bobby Sands was nominated for the seat.⁷³

The possibility of dividing in the nationalist vote worried PSF, so aspiring candidates were prevailed upon to withdraw. The SDLP did not want to be blamed for blocking the prisoners' chances of winning, so it decided not to endorse any candidate, and to support Noel Maguire. Later on in the campaign who called upon anti-Unionist voters to abstain from voting rather than vote for Sands.⁷⁴ This action demonstrated the growing

70 IRISH TIMES, 12 March 1981.

71 IRISH TIMES, 23 March 1981.

72 Keena, (1990), 90.

73 TIMES, 27 March 1981.

74 Kelley, (1988), 335.

polarisation caused by the hunger strike within Northern Irish society. By preventing a split in the nationalist, vote the SDLP blurred in the eyes of many Unionists, the distinction between the SDLP and PSF.⁷⁵

The other possible rival to Sands was Noel Maguire, the brother of the former MP Frank Maguire, Noel Maguire was persuaded to withdraw and issued a statement to the press.

I have been told that the only way of saving the life of Bobby Sands is by letting Sands go forward in the election. I just cannot have on my own hands the life of another man, I am calling on my supporters to throw their weight behind Bobby Sands.⁷⁶

As Sands' condition worsened tension began to grow between the two communities in the North. The Northern Ireland Secretary Humphrey Atkins decided to ban an H-Block parade in Cookstown, Co Tyrone, because two planned Protestant counter marches which might have clashed with it.⁷⁷

On the 9 April, Sands won the by-election with an impressive 51.2% of the vote. He gained 30492 votes compared to the Official Unionist Harold West who received 29046 votes (48.8%). This was probably the high point in propaganda terms that the Provisionals were to have.⁷⁸ To republicans one and a half counties of the Six Counties had voted in support of the "armed struggle", or had at least supported the prisoners demands. Increased attendance at rallies indicated that nationalist support

75 Michael J. Cunningham, **BRITISH GOVERNMENT POLICY IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1969-89, ITS NATURE AND EXECUTION.** Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991, 146.

76 **TIMES**, 31 March 1981.

77 **SUNDAY TIMES**, 5 April 1981.

78 **TIMES**, 11 April 1981.

was growing in the rest of the Six Counties as well.⁷⁹ In fact, this was the opposite to the apathy that PSF had felt dooming the strike only a few months before. The Committee had also now found a centre piece for their own campaign. Sands' election agent, Owen Carron, said after the victory.

The nationalist people on the behalf of the Irish people have voted against Unionism and against the H-Blocks. It is time Britain got out of Ireland and put an end to the torture of this country.

This reaction was not shared by the other representatives of northern nationalism. The SDLP said it was more a vote against Unionism in a nationalist seat than anything else. In an editorial *The Times* described the victory as a "...brilliant propaganda coup for the Provisional IRA. It authenticates their H-Block protest as never before."⁸⁰

The propaganda made great use of what the Provisionals felt was an electoral justification which they had never before received.

Last week we witnessed history being made in Fermanagh/South Tyrone. The massive electoral mandate given to Bobby Sands and his hunger striking comrades in their campaign for the five demands has made nonsense of the British criminalisation policy.⁸¹

The attendance at rallies continued to be impressive. On the 15 April an estimated 3000 people attended an anti-H-Block rally in Belfast, which was prevented from entering

79 Kelley, (1988), 336.

80 *TIMES*, 11 April 1981.

81 National H-Block/Armagh Committee, *CIRCULAR-DAY* 45. Dublin: National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 30 Mountjoy Sqr, 1981.

the city centre. There was also a half day strike in the nationalist areas of West Belfast.⁸²

This had meant that unprecedented international attention had been gained for the prisons' issue. Three back bench TD's from Dublin, Neil Blaney, John O'Connell and Sile de Valera, visited Sands in Prison. In an attempt to intercede on his behalf the TD's requested an interview with Mrs Thatcher. It was not a great surprise to most observers that this was refused.⁸³

At this stage, the gap between the relatives (under the increasing influence of the Catholic Church and the Republic's government) and the Provisionals began to widen again. At the request of Bobby Sands' sister, Marcella Sands, the European Commission on Human Rights became involved in the issue once more. She had made the request citing three violations of Sands' human rights, these were.

1. The right to life.
2. The right to protection from inhuman treatment.
3. The right of freedom of expression. (This was a specific reference to the constraints placed on contacts he was permitted to make while campaigning for the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election).

The Commission responded to her complaint by sending two Scandinavian members to investigate, the acting President Prof Carl-Aage Norgaard (Denmark) and Prof Torkel Opsahl (Norway). The Commissioners had a ninety minute meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in

82 IRISH TIMES, 16 April 1981.

83 TIMES, 22 April 1981.

London and then flew to Ulster.⁸⁴ This new attempt at mediation to save Sands life failed. After eight hours in the Maze Prison they left without seeing Sands. Procedural problems arose, Sands would only speak to the Commissioners in the presence of the PIRA prison OC Brendan McFarlane, along with Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison. Reluctantly the British permitted this, but the Commission was only willing to take part in such an interview if Sands was prepared to pursue his sister's claim, this meant suspending his fast for at least over a month until the Commission could investigate further.⁸⁵ Sands worried that the investigation was possibly a delaying tactic by the Government, and that it would be unlikely that the momentum of the protest could be regained, consequently he declined to pursue the complaint. In a previously prepared statement he criticised Charles Haughey, the Irish Taoiseach, for the "... cynical and cold-blooded manipulation" of his sister, by convincing her that the Commission would be "a vehicle for getting the British off the H-Block/Armagh hook". He also reiterated that the five demands were still the important factor in ending the dispute in the prisons.

*Now that the Commission discussion is out of the way and the confusion deliberately created by its intervention has cleared, we, the political prisoners, call once again for the people to support our demands.*⁸⁶

The next international attempt at mediation was launched by the Vatican. The Pope's emissary Msgr John

84 GUARDIAN, 25 April 1981.

85 OBSERVER, 26 April 1981.

86 Ibid.

Magee was Northern Irish, and a well respected Church diplomat. The meeting with Magee and the Atkins was not successful. The British felt that the prison was one of the most modern in the world and that the Government would continue to improve conditions if it could, but there could be no change until the fast ended.⁸⁷ This last ditch attempt to intervene before Sands died caught the National Committee unawares, transferring the initiative at least on this front, to the Church of Rome.⁸⁸

Bobby Sands' condition was deteriorating rapidly, and people within the National H-block/Armagh Committee were preparing for the next act. In Londonderry the Committee distributed a statement in preparation for Sands death. It called for a one day strike and three days of mourning in the event of his death. The statement explained. *"We intend to express our anger and sorrow over the three day mourning period in a solemn manner."* The final funeral arrangements were made, and assembly points for demonstrations protesting against his death were announced.⁸⁹

On the 5 May 1981 Bobby Sands died after sixty-six days of fasting. His funeral attracted a number estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000 people, in a mass display of nationalist sympathy and support to militant republicanism's latest martyr.⁹⁰

87 Northern Irish Information Service, *STATEMENT AFTER THE MEETING BETWEEN FATHER JOHN MAGEE AND THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND*, 29 April 1981.

88 *TIMES*, 29 April 1981.

89 *TIMES*, 30 April 1981.

90 Kelley, (1988), 337-339.

The immediate result of the death was rioting on a scale that had not been seen in the North since the early 1970's. In the Republic, the long held fears of the Southern establishment, that the violence in the North might spill over the border seemed to be realised. In Dublin, there was rioting on the night of Sands death, and on the day of the funeral. Shops that had refused to close in protest were targeted, as were British owned establishments such as the Ulster Bank (part of the National Westminster Group) and Lombards Merchant Bank. The British Home Stores shop in O'Connell Street was also attacked on the 13 May.

This violence served to expose the split in the Southern group of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee, ie between the physical force republicans, and the anti-violence faction. A Committee statement condemned the violence and called for : "...*peaceful and dignified demonstrations*".⁹¹ While *An Phoblact/Republican News* the Provisional newspaper commented.

*The intensity of the rioting, spearheaded by angry youths, and with the approval of the bulk of the nationalist community has provided a welcome sign of the revived spirit of republican resistance amongst a saddened people.*⁹²

The strain of these contradictions was at its greatest in the Republic, where the coalition became undermined owing to disputes between the pro and anti violence factions. Those who took their position from a human rights standpoint were increasingly alarmed by the levels of violence caused by the dispute in the Republic. This difference

91 Reed, (1984), 355-356.

92 *AN PHOBLACT/REPUBLICAN NEWS*, 9 May 1981, quoted in Reed, (1984), 356-357.

resulted in the demise of the Southern Committee. These factors, combined with the problem that the British now were not going to concede to the five demands no matter how many prisoners died and how much rioting there would be.⁹³ Later this was to become a problem in the North when the relatives and the Catholic Church grew increasingly hostile to the continuation of the strike, realising that they could not win. Indeed as early as the 14 May the panic factor was already demonstrated when Cardinal O'Fiaich sent a telegram to Margaret Thatcher pleading, "*In God's name, don't allow another death*".⁹⁴

However, a few options remained open to the activists. In the North, while PSF was unable to stand for the local elections on the 23 May, due to a resolution at its previous ard fhes, pro-prisoner candidates made a good showing. Perhaps most dramatically of all, they defeated Gerry Fitt in the West Belfast Council seat that he had held for over twenty years,⁹⁵ highlighting the dangers for constitutional nationalists who opposed the republican cause too loudly.

In the Republic Charles Haughey, the new leader of Fianna Fail, sought a mandate as Taoiseach, but had decided against an election until the instability caused by the situation in the North had abated. However, the hunger strike continued, so he decided to hold an election on the 11 June 1981.⁹⁶

93 Reed, (1984), 358.

94 GUARDIAN, 14 May 1981.

95 Kelley, (1988), 339.

96 Joyce & Murtagh, (1983), 152.

Within the "smash the H-Blocks" camp there were some divisions as to the form of the ticket which candidates would run on. The PD's and the IRSP groups ideologically more Marxist, felt that their candidates should have a wide based left wing agenda, as well as, the prisons issue. On the other hand PSF felt that a single issue campaign in certain carefully selected constituencies would be more successful. As in most discussions within the national committee PSF by force of numbers won. This resulted in the selection of nine candidates who were all prisoners including four hunger strikers.⁹⁷

The prisoners ran on the basis of their five demands on a ticket similar to the one Bobby Sands had represented in the North. Their Manifesto used the election very much as platform to get the attention of people who would not normally concern themselves with the PIRA or PSF.

The hunger strike continues: Joe McDonnell, Kieran Doherty, Kevin Lynch and Martin Hurson have taken the place of their dead comrades. Mrs Thatcher refuses to move an inch.

The manifesto also attacked the Republics government for helping border security with Irish troops and for not doing enough for the prisoners.

Without Irish Troops on the border, she [Margaret Thatcher] doesn't have a military strategy...

A No 1 vote for the Prisoners is a demand that the Irish Government stand up to the Brits in defence of the Prisoners lives.⁹⁸

97 Kelley, (1988), 340.

98 National H-Block/Armagh Committee, *ELECTION MANIFESTO; H-BLOCK/ARMAGH PRISONER CANDIDATES*. Dublin: National H-Block/Armagh Committee, June 1981.

Outside of the constituencies in which the prisoners stood there were also attempts to make the fast an electoral issue. Campaigners released leaflets criticising named TD's from all the principal political parties. Accusing them of complicity in the deaths of the hunger strikers by dint of not saying anything in support of the prisoners.⁹⁹ The eventual result was that two prisoners were elected to the Dail. Paddy Agnew in Louth, and the hunger striker Kieran Doherty in Cavan/Monaghan.¹⁰⁰

The two prisoners elected were to be instrumental in ensuring that Fianna Fail lost power to a Fine Gael/Labour coalition. This was because the two were elected in traditional nationalist (Fianna Fail) areas, thereby depriving Haughey of two important votes in Parliament, as the prisoners could of course not take their seats even had they wanted to (they would not have). This was to spoil Thatcher-Haughey relations for years to come when Fianna Fail retook office later in the decade, as Haughey felt that Thatchers intransigence had cost him power.¹⁰¹

The electoral battle also continued in the North when, regardless of earlier promises to desist, Owen Carron, Bobby Sands' election agent, announced his candidature for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat in the forth coming by-election caused by the hunger striker's death. Legislation had been swiftly passed in the Westminster Parliament to ensure that imprisoned

99 *COBH H-BLOCK COMMITTEE*, Cobh, Co.Cork: June 1981.

100 Reed, (1984), 360.

101 Joyce & Murtagh, (1983), 153.

convicted felons could not stand for Parliament, to prevent a repetition of the previous by-election.¹⁰²

During June, the by now commonplace announcements that new hunger strikes were to begin, continued with four further names announced. A further attempt at mediation was made by the Southern establishment. This time the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) became involved in the dispute. The prisoners chose to reject the solution proposed by the ICJP, but it continued its contacts with the relatives and the National Committee (for further details see Chapter VII).¹⁰³

In July, Martin Hurson died after a forty-six day fast. The first cracks were beginning to appear in the strike. On the 31 July the family of another hunger striker Paddy Quinn asked for medical intervention after he had fallen unconscious on the seventy-seventh day of his fast. This was overshadowed when Kevin Lynch died after seventy-one days on the 1 August. The following day Kiern Doherty also died as did Tom McElwee on the 8 August and on the 20 August Michael "Micky" Devine.¹⁰⁴

At this stage the Provisionals were apparently determined to see the strike through to the bitter end. An article in *An Phoblact/Republican News* maintained that,

*The key to real progress, which is the saving of the hunger strikers lives, remains whether palatable or not, the ability of the prisoners supporters to move the Catholic hierarchy, the SDLP and the Free State [Irish] government.*¹⁰⁵

102 Kelley, (1988), 341.

103 Reed, (1984), 360.

104 Ibid, 361.

105 *AN PHOBLACT/REPUBLICAN NEWS*, 15 August 1981, quoted in Reed, (1984), 361.

The prisons campaign received a boost when Owen Carron was elected to Westminster with a larger vote than Bobby Sands had originally gained. Carron received 31,278 votes while his Unionist rival Ken Maginnis received 29,048. This was despite the candidature of two non-Unionist parties, the Alliance Party and the Workers Party/Republican Clubs (the old Official IRA).¹⁰⁶

The propaganda released by the Provisionals was tantamount to a justification for continuing the fast. Disillusionment had beset many supporters, who believed that the British were not going to give in, giving rise to the feeling that further deaths were pointless. This meant that a theme of "perfidious Albion" was a very strong element in the leaflets.

*The prisoners endured four and a half years of torture and degradation in the protest in the H-Block and Armagh before they felt driven to use the only weapon left to them- the weapon of their own lives.*¹⁰⁷

What is the basis for faith in a government which humiliated Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Daly and callously exploited the intervention of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, and the International Red Cross...

*The blanket men and women in Armagh know this; the hunger strikers are enduring it.*¹⁰⁸

However, by this time, discord became apparent as the Church authorities led by Fr Dennis Faul an assistant prison chaplain were persuading the relatives to intervene once the hunger strikers had lost consciousness. Faul first managed to persuade the

106 IRISH TIMES, 22 August 1981.

107 National H-Block/Armagh Committee, *WHY THE HUNGER STRIKE CONTINUES*, Dublin: National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 1981.

108 Belfast H-Block/Armagh Committee, *THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HUNGER STRIKE*, Belfast: Belfast H-Block/Armagh Committee, 1981.

relatives of Pat McCeowan to intervene. Then the relatives of Matt Devlin and Lawrence McKown followed suit. The next stage was reached when Liam McCloskey ceased to fast when he was informed that his family would intervene. Subsequently Fr Faul called a meeting of the relatives of the men still on the fast, which resulted in a statement from all, but one, of the families that they would intervene.¹⁰⁹ The prisoners tried to look for various ways of circumventing this problem. However, the relatives and the Church had finally outmanoeuvred them and they had no choice but to give up.

The Provisionals had been undermined when the INLA decided that its prisoners would no longer participate as the British were intransigent. Besides, they were fast running out of INLA members in the Maze.¹¹⁰

On the 24 August, Michael Devine became the last hunger striker to die after sixty days of fasting.¹¹¹ On the 26 August 1981 the authorities announced that they were prepared to concede on several points including clothing and some remission. These concessions were made conditional; both the "blanket" protest and the hunger strike had to end. Later on the new Northern Ireland Secretary of State, James Prior, made it clear that reforms would be only made after the dispute was over, so at 3.00pm on the 3 October the remaining hunger strikers broke their fast 217 days after Bobby Sands had first refused his breakfast.¹¹²

109 Reed, (1984), 361-366.

110 IRISH TIMES, 22 August 1981.

111 INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, 24 August 1981.

112 Kelley, (1988), 344-345.

In the end the external campaign had been unable to maintain a proper anti-Unionist coalition, but for a time it had at least ensured that PSF was not in direct conflict with the relatives, though in the end when this broke down it effectively killed the protest. Fr Faul, for all his hard work, would not have broken the strike if he had not already had soft ground on which to work.

The protest was able to attract a level of support in areas which had never before supported the Provisionals. This support came from the nationalists in the North, people in the Republic and internationally. The dispute, when it was initially started by Kieren Nugent in 1976 had been practically ignored, but by the end of its life span it was commanding world wide attention; from Iran where the British Embassy is situated on Bobby Sands Street to Los Angeles were at the time of writing an actor with well known Irish republican sympathies, Mickey Rourke, is attempting to make a film about Bobby Sands, The hunger strike was amplified and this would not have happened without the external political campaign which started in the Turf Lodge estate by the RAC.

Finally, the campaign marked the political coming of age of PSF where the new northern left learnt how to conduct electoral politics and use the media to best effect, an ability which the Southern conservatives never had. This prepared the scene in the eighties, for the battle with the SDLP over the nationalist vote. A direct result of this was the defeat of Gerry Fitt by Gerry Adams in the 1983 general election, which signalled the

final coming of age of the Armalite and Ballot Paper policy, that was to worry all of Humphrey Atkins' successors.

4d. THE FEMALE PROTEST AT ARMAGH PRISON.

The female republican paramilitary prisoners were all housed in Armagh Prison. They had not joined the "blanket" protest in 1976 as they had enjoyed a form of special status which had never been removed. For instance all women prisoners were permitted to wear their own clothing.¹¹³ However, prison officers in Armagh gaol were never exempt from the outside assassination campaign. This naturally led to tensions within the gaol causing a grave deterioration in relations between the warders and the prisoners.

The "dirty" protest spread to Armagh in February 1980.¹¹⁴ This was an escalation of a limited protest by the thirty republican prisoners that had started to protest against the abandonment of official special status in October 1976. Initially thirteen women were involved in the dispute, but by March 1978 this had increased to twenty-four protesters. The limited protest had resulted in the boycotting of prison work, but, perhaps due to the liberal inclinations of the prison Governor Hugh Cunningham. Although they were punished the prisoners did not escalate their protest, as the men had done, and daily exercise continued in the gaol yard.¹¹⁵

When Cunningham moved to Magilligan Prison his replacement at Armagh was George Scott, allegedly a

113 Reed, (1984), 282.

114 Coogan, (1980), 114.

115 Reed, (1984), 282.

strict disciplinarian, who was blamed in some quarters for the series of incidents that led to the decisions by the prisoners to escalate to a full "dirty" protest in 1980.¹¹⁶

In 1978, when Scott was appointed, he attempted a variety of changes in the running of the prison. At Easter he tried to integrate republican, loyalist and "criminal" prisoners in the same cell blocks. Owing to opposition from the prisoners he was forced to abandon these reforms but he remained determined to end the protest. On the 7-8 May protests from remand prisoners were allegedly met with a baton charge by male warders.¹¹⁷ As a result prisoners were locked up in their cells for several weeks over the early summer which had led to some residual resentment amongst the inmates towards the prison regime.¹¹⁸

In 1980 a PIRA member was killed while transporting a bomb by train in Portadown. As he had three sisters serving sentences in Armagh the republican prisoners chose to hold a commemorative ceremony for him within the gaol. This involved a parade in the uniform of Cumann na mBan (the female wing of the PIRA). This was regarded by the authorities as an unacceptable provocation and they decided to conduct a search of the cells in the B-Wing of the prison looking for the black skirts that make up the paramilitary uniform.¹¹⁹

116 Coogan, (1980), 114-115.

117 Clarke, (1986), 63.

118 Coogan, (1980), 114-115.

119 Ibid, 89 & 115.

On 7 February, during the evening meal, the prisoners were allegedly surrounded by sixty male and female warders, who after some disturbances, placed the women in two large association cells. The inmates own cells were then searched for the uniforms and some of the women prisoners were brought before the governor. The women were then allegedly deprived of sanitary facilities. This resulted in the now familiar routine of prisoners throwing urine and excrement into the corridors, and then out of the gaol windows until these were boarded up. The result of this was that by 12 February a full scale dirty protest was in action, with faeces and menstrual blood being smeared upon the cell walls and protesters refusing to put on clean clothing.¹²⁰

The PIRA leadership had been attempting to restrain the female prisoners from escalating the protest to a full "dirty" phase. Essentially the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and the Provisionals' Army Council, while understanding the womens wish to be involved, was aware that this protest was very sensitive and if a mistake was made it could back fire upon the campaigners. The prisoners had wanted to embark on it for about six months beforehand, but as the male protest at the Maze was already using up much of the Provisionals' time and organisation a female protest was thought to be more of a hindrance than a help.¹²¹

120 Reed, (1984), 321-322.

121 Coogan, (1980), 118.

After the authorities had made toilets and sanitary towels again available to the protesting inmates the dispute entered into a regular pattern in which the women would accept a change of clothing every three months. Although the protest lacked both the issues and the momentum of the Long Kesh/Maze dispute, the resolution of the Armagh situation was inevitably linked to a solution for the H-Blocks, and so could only be ended when the five demands of the male prisoners had been addressed.¹²²

It was certainly the case that the situation in Armagh was useful in the propaganda war. Catholic Ireland, as has already been stated, is an extremely socially conservative nation. The women's protest occupied an extremely interesting position; public opinion held that women were not supposed to engage in such degrading things as the dirty protest and so it made a very strong impression. Tim Pat Coogan, in the 1987 revision of his history, *The IRA*, stated that conditions in Armagh made a greater impression upon him than the Maze.

*I visited Long Kesh and Armagh during the strike and found the Armagh conditions the worst, ...the fact that in addition to faeces the women's menstrual blood was smeared on the walls of the cells, which I found particularly nauseating.*¹²³

This is perhaps why he seemed to over estimate the importance of the female protest in his contemporary account of the prisons dispute produced in 1980. In *On The Blanket*, he devoted three chapters and significant sections of the rest of the book to the Armagh protest

122 Clarke, (1980), 112.

123 Tim Pat Coogan, *THE IRA*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988, 618.

despite the fact that, even at that time, and subsequently the Maze attracted more attention, and that the smaller female dispute was subsidiary to the H-Blocks.¹²⁴

The protest was also useful conversely in influencing left wing feminist support for the Provisionals. For instance, Nell McCafferty, writing about the protester, Pauline McLaughton said.

*Shall we feminists record that she is inflicting the condition on herself in case any question of moral dereliction arises against us? The menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh prison smells to high heaven. Shall we turn our noses up.*¹²⁵

This form of polemic was backed up by events that emphasised the role of women in the prisons and the republican struggle generally.

On the 8 March 1981, International Women's Day there was a picket of Armagh Prison organised by the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.¹²⁶ This increased female participation also fitted with the new lefts wish to promote an increased role for women in the struggle.

It was during the first 1980 hunger strike that the women decided that they should also join the strike, despite seeing the psychological damage that a hunger strike could cause. The Price sisters who had been force fed during their campaign for repatriation to Ireland were now in Armagh but, despite their victory, now suffered from Anorexia and had to be released from prison early for health reasons. On the 1 December 1980, three woman from Belfast, Mairead Farrell, Mary Doyle, and

124 Coogan, (1980), Chaps 9, 10, and 15.

125 Clarke, (1986), 113.

126 Reed, (1984), 347.

Mairead Nugent, joined the month old male strike.¹²⁷ This strike dictated that the protesters only took water and salt tablets for eighteen days, before abandoning the strike when it seemed that the issue was being resolved by Humphrey Atkins.¹²⁸

The dirty protest was to last a total of thirteen months during which the protesters endured their self imposed conditions essentially in support of the males in the Maze. Not only did they endure the smell of their cells as described above but also, they did not wash, brush their teeth, or change clothing including underwear for three month periods. Prisoners on the dirty protest had also ceased to have any exercise outdoors as a punishment.¹²⁹ That they had endured these conditions largely on a point of principle, not only showed a striking dedication to their cause, but it also was an example of their fanaticism. It is also an indication of the leadership qualities and politicisation of the Armagh OC, Mairead Farrell, who upon leaving prison joined the pro-Adams wing of the Provisionals in both PSF and in the PIRA General Head Quarters Staff. She subsequently was picked to lead the team that was to plant a bomb in Gibraltar in 1987, where she was killed by the Special Air Service (SAS), when they thought she and her unarmed colleagues were about to set off a radio controlled bomb.¹³⁰ She was thus propelled into the pantheon of republican martyrdom.

127 Clarke, (1986), 127.

128 Adams, Morgan, & Bambridge, (1988), 139.

129 Coogan, (1988), 618.

130 Adams, Morgan, & Bambridge, (1988), 165-167.

The effect of the Armagh protest was only useful in terms of propaganda. The Unionists ignored it as they did much of the protest (as will be outlined in later Chapters). It did not play an important role in the general protest. To the authorities it could only be described as an irritation, while to republicans it was an unnecessary side show. In effect, the endurance of the appalling conditions for thirteen months was wasted as it neither shortened nor lengthened the eventual resolution of the prison dispute.

This was also true in a more general sense with the external campaign as a whole. The external campaign was a vital part of the prison protest yet like the internal dispute it underestimated the determination of the government to see the protest defeated. The campaign must take responsibility for the end of the protest as it failed in two principal ways. It failed to maintain a united front between the relatives and the Provisionals during 1981. It also misjudged the attitude of the government and so failed to warn the prisoners that, after the first few deaths, a compromise was the only solution, recognizing that the five points were now unachievable. This failure to read accurately the messages emitting from the NIO led directly to unnecessary deaths and the ignominious end of the fast on the 3 October 1981.

The prisoners and the outside campaigners had also failed to address the moral and ethical dilemmas that the hunger strike presented. This failure was to play an important role in the defeat of the fast and the split

between the Church and the H-Block campaign. The fuller philosophical issues as well as the medical aspects are discussed in the next Chapter, before the events within the prisons during the hunger strike are discussed in later sections of the thesis.

CHAPTER V THE MEDICAL, ETHICAL, AND MORAL DILEMMAS OF HUNGER STRIKING

5a. INTRODUCTION.

The concept of hunger striking in prison presents a series of moral problems to both the individual hunger striker and to the authorities who are confronted with it. The problem is exacerbated further if the hunger strike has political undertones. If the prisoner has been convicted of violent crimes that come broadly under the banner of terrorism it presents a complicated dilemma to the government that has to respond to the demands of the striker in some way.¹ That is, the government will have to address the problem to which the protesters are objecting without falling into the trap of being seen to legitimate the terrorist organisation that the prisoner is a member of, or to encourage others to try and emulate this success.

When one brings in the Irish dimension to this equation the issues cloud further. The prisoners face the problem of having to reconcile a hunger strike that is possibly going to result in death, (which was arguably the case in the 1980 and 1981 strikes) with a Catholic doctrine that is fundamentally opposed to the taking of

1 In calling PIRA a terrorist organisation I use the definition as outlined by the Dutch academics, Schmid and Jongman, who reviewed the academic literature on terrorism and defined a minimum consensus on its definition. For more details see; Alex P.Schmid and Albert J.Jongman, **POLITICAL TERRORISM, A NEW GUIDE TO ACTORS, AUTHORS, CONCEPTS, DATA BASES, THEORIES AND LITERATURE**. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1988, 25-28.

one's own life. However, Christianity also has the concept of martyrdom. This religious acceptance of laying down your life for the good of others was backed up by the old Celtic Irish Civil Code the Scenics Mor, which held the person at which the fast was targeted responsible for the death of the hunger striker.²

Further, historically the hunger strike has taken a place in the public imagination as the final recourse of the disadvantaged and downtrodden. This association can be traced back to the strikes by the suffragettes and Mahatma Ghandi in the early part of the twentieth century. In Irish history there has also been a tradition of canonising Republicans after their deaths while they had been vilified when still alive. An example of this was the Dublin crowds treatment of the 1916 martyrs. They were jeered at the time of capture but once executed they became national heroes.³ This factor was well summarised in a statement about Ireland attributed to Terence MacSwiney. *"It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer"*.⁴

These problems have not been addressed by the literature on the prison protest, which as stated in the introduction has tended to be journalistic, or polemical without pretence of being impartial. This omission from the literature is further in need of rectifying, as the governments of many democratic countries when dealing with hunger striking terrorists have reacted differently

2 David Beresford, **TEN MEN DEAD**. London: Grafton, 1987, 14-15.

3 J. Bowyer Bell, **THE SECRET ARMY, A HISTORY OF THE IRA 1915-1970**, London: Sphere Books, 1972, 24-27.

4 Ibid, 2.

to the British when faced with similar dilemmas. However, the prison protest has set precedents for the treatment of prisoners guilty of politically inspired violent crimes.⁵ The Spanish and German governments have had to face hunger strikes, mounted respectively by ETA and the RAF. In 1991, the Portuguese government released members of the FP-25 group (*Forces Populaires 25 de Abril*- Peoples Forces of 25 April) from gaol in response to a hunger strike.⁶ Further, and more recently, the Irish government in 1990 had to respond to the hunger strike of Dessie Ellis an alleged PIRA member who opposed his own extradition to the UK on the grounds that he would not have a fair trial (he was acquitted), and that he was to be tried for a crime that he had already been punished for in the Republic.⁷ In 1991 the British have again had to face up to hunger strikes in Northern Ireland as part of the campaign against the integration of Remand Prisoners at Crumlin Road Prison.

In the mid 1970's the West German authorities had been faced with a hunger strike by the far left *Baader-Meinhof* Terror group (RAF). They had also fasted for the status of political prisoners, and claimed to suffer from psychological torture through isolation and their cells

5 When the European Commission of Human Rights rejected the prisoners complaints, it can be speculated that this was because it might have proved an embracing precedent in the treatment of terrorists else were in Europe, especially given its rejection of the RAF prisoners complaints in 1978 as mentioned in Chapter III.

GUARDIAN, 20 June 1980.

6 EUROPEAN, 19-21 July 1991.

7 For details of the Ellis hunger strike the best coverage came from the PSF newspaper.

AN PHOBLAGHT/REPUBLICAN NEWS, 11 October to 15 November 1990.

being constantly lit for twenty-four hours a day. The fast eventually resulted in the death of Holger Meins.⁸

This has meant that a detailed examination of the medical and moral aspects of hunger striking is necessary to this thesis. In section 5b the medical condition of starvation is examined. This is followed in section 5c by an examination of the ethical problems that are presented to the prison authorities and medical staff by such a fast. In section 5d the question of whether the hunger strikers were suicides or martyrs is discussed with specific reference to Christian philosophy. Finally 5e explores the attitude of the churches in Northern Ireland to the fast.

5b. THE MEDICAL DEFINITION OF STARVATION.

The medical definition of starvation is described as "*undernutrition of sufficient severity to warrant in-patient treatment in hospital*". This normally occurs when the body weight is reduced to less than 75% of the normal weight of the patient.⁹

The process of starvation is well documented in medical textbooks, though the form of starvation from which most of the data is compiled comes from sufferers of the psychological neurosis known as *Anorexia Nervosa* or victims of famine disasters. However, the essential stages are as underlined below, though often anorexics kill themselves inadvertently before the final stages of

8 Jillian Becker, *HITLERS CHILDREN, THE STORY OF THE BAADER-MEINHOF TERRORIST GANG*. London: Michael Joseph, 1977, 269-273.

9 John Macleod (ed), *DAVIDSON'S PRINCIPALS AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE, A TEXTBOOK FOR STUDENTS AND DOCTORS*. Edinburgh & New York: Churchill Livingstone, 1981, 86.

starvation by breaking their fasts and gorging themselves rather than concisely choosing to die.

Immediately after the deprivation of food there is a rapid loss of weight, though this soon slows down as the body adjusts itself to starvation with a reduction in the size of most glands and muscles, so less energy is required for their maintenance. The human metabolism also slows down and voluntary movements are curtailed in the effort to save energy. This combined with the simple fact that the body needs to exert less energy to move about due to weight loss ensures that the body will stabilise for a period. At this stage there might also be secondary problems connected with *Anaemia* (the lack of red blood cells).¹⁰

The second stage of starvation is brought on after the prolonged deprivation of food. This is when "famine" *Oedema* begins to appear. *Oedema* (excess water leading to the swelling of body cells) is caused by the wasting of tissues without a corresponding loss of body water.¹¹ During the third stage of famine, *Hypothermia* becomes a great danger to the patient. This was a real risk to the protesters as they remained on the blanket in cold cells during the 1980 protest and the first part of the 1981 strike. At this stage psychological symptoms frequently occur. These are demonstrated by mental restlessness, irritability and displays of indifference to the troubles of others coupled with physical apathy. By this time the patient no longer feels hungry. It is at this stage that

10 Ibid, 87.

11 Ibid, 87.

if they are to facilitate a full recovery the patient must be force fed by doctors. At this point secondary infections also become a great problem. The respiratory muscles are now seriously weakened by wasting and bronchopneumonias which carry an increased mortality rate; diarrhoea and blindness is also common.¹² Soon after this coma sets in, which is shortly followed by the death of the patient.

The death of a hunger striker can be speeded up if they are not in a healthy state at the start of a hunger strike. For instance this occurred in the case of Martin Hurson, the seventh death of the 1981 strike, who died as a result of kidney failure causing toxins to enter his body. They killed him when they reached his brain after forty-five days fasting. It was thought that the kidney failure was caused by alleged sever beatings received from the police at the time of his arrest in 1976 and during the forced washings of the protesters in 1978.¹³

If a hunger striker survives a fast there are a variety of psychological problems which may result in long term problems for the individual. Aside from the danger of brain damage caused by the latter stages of food deprivation, the victim may suffer from a variety of neuroses as a direct result of a fast. During a fast the body will attempt to protect the brain from the effects of starvation for as long as it can, due to the brain being probably the single most important organ in the

12 Ibid, 87.

13 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, THE H-BLOCKS AND THE RISE OF SINN FEIN**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 179.

body. However, in the last stages, especially during coma, the brain is not supplied with sufficient oxygen by the body; permanent damage results.

The neuroses which the striker might suffer from are largely formed by a distaste for food which might have been caused by forced feeding by the authorities during the strike (though the patient will have to be forced fed if he/she comes off the strike in its final stages).¹⁴ In the case of the Price sisters who chose to fast, demanding repatriation to a Northern gaol rather than serve their sentence in a mainland British one, this led to a long hunger strike with frequent force feeding, which was eventually successful. Subsequently, they were transferred to Armagh Prison but they had developed *Anorexia Nervosa* and had to be released for medical reasons early from gaol.¹⁵ This is yet another side to the sacrifice a hunger striker may have to face when they embark upon hunger strike even if they do not die.

5c. THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS FACED BY THE AUTHORITIES IN A HUNGER STRIKE.

The principal ethical dilemma faced by both the authorities and prison medics in the case of hunger strikes is whether they should force feed the protester or permit the person to die. Traditionally, the British

14 Tim Pat Coogan, *ON THE BLANKET, THE H-BLOCK STORY*. Swords Co. Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 120.

15 Marion and Delores Price were released early respectively in 1980 and 1981 on humanitarian grounds. Robert Bell, Robert Johnstone & Robin Wilson (eds), *TROUBLED TIMES, FORTNIGHT MAGAZINE AND THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1970-91*, Belfast: Black Staff Press, 1991, 188-190.

have chosen the option of force feeding.¹⁶ This has the advantage of preventing a death which could be politically embarrassing to the government, while allowing doctors to honour their *Hippocratic* oath not to kill patients and fulfil their duties of caring for the patient.¹⁷ This also means that doctors need not reconcile their own professional duties with the patient's wishes, as the state chooses for them.

After the death of Michael Gaughan from complications arising from force feeding during a hunger strike, the British are thought to have decided that the policy of force feeding was counter-productive.¹⁸ Subsequently, the UK government chose to change policy in accordance with the Tokyo Medical Convention.¹⁹ This had the advantage of clearly stating the British policy had changed and that unless the family of a striker intervened then the strike would last to the death. It was hoped this might deter prisoners from using such a method and ensure that the British could not be accused of playing cat and mouse with prisoners lives. Finally, at the level of human rights it recognised that a prisoner was ultimately judged to be able to make such

16 When the authorities were faced by an earlier hunger strike launched on the Mainland by the PIRA they chose the option of force feeding which led to the hunger strike of the Price Sisters lasting 206 days.

Kevin J. Kelley, **THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRA**. London: Zed Books, 1988, 223.

17 The Hippocratic oath (the ancient Greek medical code of ethics) states that the doctor should "*be for the benefit of the patients... not for their hurt or for any wrong*".

18 Tim Pat Coogan, **THE IRA**. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988, 517-520.

19 **THE POLITICS OF TERROR, INTELLIGENCE DIGEST**, Special Brief No 80, 19 June 1981.

decisions and so able to take responsibility for the consequences of their chosen course of action. This view is not shared by all Western democracies. The Germans read their constitution as stating that they must preserve life when prisoners go on hunger strike and so will force feed them.

The new British attitude to fasting ensured that, in the case of the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes, the participants knew that they would die unless they chose to take food, as the state would not intervene without the consent of themselves or their relatives.

5d. THE MORAL PROBLEMS OF HUNGER STRIKING.

The protesters all came from the Catholic community, which entailed an attempt to reconcile their actions with Christianity- which condemns suicide categorically- and the Catholic Church which is theologically conservative and therefore extremely hostile to the taking of one's own life. The traditional definition of suicide is "*the act of taking one's own life*". Psychiatrists would define the hunger strikers as altruistic suicides; that is self destruction motivated by "*excessive altruism and sense of duty*". This includes religious martyrdom, euthanasia, the traditional Japanese *hara-kiri* (ritual self disembowelment), and Hindu *sati* (when a widow throws herself on her husbands funeral pyre).²⁰ Theologians and Philosophers though take an alternative view differentiating between separate forms of altruistic suicide.

²⁰ Erwin Stengel, *SUICIDE & ATTEMPTED SUICIDE*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969, 14 & 49.

Christian teaching maintains that humans are not the authors of their own lives, nor absolute owners. It is not up to a person to choose how long a life should be lived but God. So suicide, which is defined normally as the direct and deliberate taking of ones own life for any self-regarding motive is opposed.²¹ Suicide is held to be a religious offence on three different counts.

1. It is a sin against God and a rejection of his love and a denial of his sovereignty.

2. It is an offence against ones own person which is made in God's image, and a violation of the sixth commandment; an act of despair which precludes repentance.

3. It is an offence against mankind that deprives one's family and society of a member prematurely, and also denies society the opportunity of ministering to a persons needs.²²

This has led to both criminal and cannon law holding suicide as an offence and punishing it, if unsuccessful as a crime, or if it results in a death by denying people a Christian burial. Similarly, traditional European folklore, holds that suicides are condemned to walking the earth for an eternity; their bodies were frequently buried at cross-roads with stakes through their hearts to prevent the ghost from rising.²³

In the case of Ireland this meant that if the hunger strikers were in fact committing suicide, then the Church

21 John Macquarrie (ed), A DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS. London: SCM Press, (1967), 335.

22 Ibid, 335.

23 Stengel, (1969), 7.

would have to condemn them. However, if they were not committing suicide then they could receive burial. This led to some strong theological discussion within the Catholic Church that frequently seemed more a matter of the individual's political views and nationality than their faith. Within the Church the English Cardinal, Basil Hume, condemned the hunger strike while O'Fiaich chose to be ambivalent about it.²⁴

The debate revolved around several issues. Firstly, who or whom were responsible for the deaths of fasting prisoners? The authorities who would not give in to the prisoners demands or the hunger strikers? Secondly, was the strike itself an act of violence or non-violence? And thirdly, were the hunger strikers martyrs or suicides? This debate was to initially split the Catholic Church.

During the opening stages of the 1981 hunger strike the Catholic Church was openly divided as the Bishop of Derry, Dr Cahal Daly, was openly hostile to the strike. Meanwhile Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich was sympathetic, at least to the aims of the protesters, and his actions seemed to imply that he held the authorities to blame for any deaths. After Bobby Sands had died and Francis Hughes was dying O'Fiaich sent a telegram to 10 Downing Street beseeching Margaret Thatcher to prevent another death.²⁵

This attitude was in keeping with the medieval Irish tradition of hunger striking as outlined in the Senchus Mor. This system of laws held that the person held responsible for the death of a striker was the person at

24 Clarke, (1986), 149 & DAILY TELEGRAPH, 23 June 1981.
25 GUARDIAN, 14 May 1981.

which the fast had been directed not the striker.²⁶ But this has no place in traditional Christian theology.

It is arguable that the British, having outlined clearly that they would allow any hunger striker to die, and having clearly stated that they would not submit to this form of moral black mail, had ensured that the responsibility for the death of a prisoner by fasting was the individual's. This meant that the strikers were breaking the rule that Pope Leo XIII wrote in 1891 to the German and Austrian Bishops saying, "*The divine law forbids anyone rashly to lay his life on the line*" (*ne quis temere vitam proiciat suam*)."²⁷ This attitude was reflected by Dr Daly when he said in a speech on the day that Bobby Sands started his fast,

*I do not believe that it is morally justified to endanger health or life by hunger strike in the present circumstances, nor do I believe that it is right to risk ones mental and physical health by living in cells fouled by ones own excrement. This, to my mind, degrades the dignity of the individual.*²⁸

There is a further argument that, the question of whether or not the hunger strikers were suicides was reflected not in the act of fasting to the death but in the greater context of the strike. The argument follows that the definition of the act depends on whether it is an act of violence or of non-violence. When Gandhi went on hunger strike fully intending to die if necessary it was a supreme form of non-violence in keeping with his strong pacifist views. They were carefully designed elements in a non-violent protest against British policy

26 Beresford, (1987), 14-15.

27 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 23 June 1981.

28 IRISH TIMES, 2 March 1981.

in India. His twelfth and final strike was an attempt to prevent the Hindu and Islamic communities from attacking one another during the intercommunal strife attached to the partition of India.²⁹ In Ireland however the hunger strike was in the context of violence.

The hunger strikers were all convicted of violent crimes and committed to an armed struggle that included assassination, bombing, and the terrorising of opponents, whether from within their own community- the likes of Gerry Fitt, Paddy Devlin and the Peace People- or from without. Further, the organisations which the prisoners belonged to were still operating, despite the pleas of the entire Church leadership (including the Pope) to abandon violence. Finally, the tensions brought about in the wider community by the fast had caused rioting and death. This meant the strike was not an act of non-violence but one of violence. Thus, while not absolving the authorities of all responsibility for a death most of the blame for any death was firmly laid upon the individual.³⁰

It was in this context that the Irish Bishops, in a statement released after their regular meeting at Maynooth College, Co Kildare, eventually described the fast as "evil". The statement explained that the Bishops feared an escalation of violence if the strike continued and therefore called upon the strikers to,

... reflect deeply on the evil of their actions and their consequences. The contempt for human life, the incitement to revenge, the

29 Raymond E.Helmick, *N IRELAND IN MORAL FOCUS, THE TABLET*, 30 May 1981.

30 Ibid.

*exploitation of the hunger strikers to further a campaign of Murder, the intimidation of the innocent, the initiation of children into violence, all of this constitutes an appalling mass of evil.*³¹

This leads on to the final justification of the hunger strikers as martyrs and not suicides. Martyrdom is defined as the laying down of your life for your beliefs and/or for the comfort of others. The Provisionals claim that the hunger strikers died in order to improve the prison conditions in which their comrades lived. One could draw parallels to actions like that of Captain L.E.G Oates who walked out of his tent to certain death in the snow in order to stop holding his colleagues back in their ill-fated attempt to return from the South Pole alive in the 1910/12 British Antarctic expedition.

Republicanism has in the past managed to get hunger strikers to be regarded as martyrs for the Irish War of Independence. These individuals chose to protest about prison conditions and died. Subsequently prison "martyrs", like Terence MacSwiney the Lord Mayor of Cork, became regarded as being among the founding fathers of the modern Irish State. It was in these peoples' footsteps that the men of the Maze chose to follow.

However, martyrdom within the Judao-Christian tradition involves a respect for the sanctity of life as one can not be martyred with one's own hand. It is one thing to die or be prepared to die for one's beliefs, but if there is any morally acceptable way out then one must take it. Martyrs who have been killed for their beliefs or teaching their creed were prepared to die, or take

³¹ TIMES, 19 June 1981.

actions that could lead to death, but if they were given the choice of death or imprisonment without compromising their beliefs then they would have had to choose the latter course of action for they could not choose death over life as this is God's decision and not mankind's.³² Even in the case of Captain Oates he did not choose to directly take his own life (eg. with a revolver), but to follow a course of events that would lead to his death by exposure. It was the weather and not Oates himself that caused the death.

However, in the case of the hunger strikers they chose a path where they deprived themselves of food and they themselves could have accepted food at any time without having to compromise their own beliefs. The authorities had made it clear that they would not give in to the prisoners' demands. This meant that, certainly in the case of the later hunger strikers who replaced the first few dead prisoners on the fast, they were clearly choosing death and not simply availing themselves of a series of circumstances which might lead to their deaths.

5e. THE ATTITUDE OF THE CHURCHES TO THE HUNGER STRIKE.

The role and attitude of the Churches to the hunger strike, especially that of the Catholic Church, was of great interest and controversy in the British media. Perhaps predictably the UK press attitude to the role of the Catholic Church was hostile and misunderstood much of what the it was trying to do. The person probably

32 For further information on Christian ethics in regard to self-sacrifice and Martyrdom see: Ronald M. Green, **RELIGION AND MORAL REASON**. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 93-98 & 107.

subjected to the most criticism was Fr Denis Faul of Dungannon who helped keep the ministry in the Maze Prison, and with Fr Raymond Murray had been tireless in exposing the abuses of power and injustices that had happened in the Castlereagh detention centre during the 1970's.³³ Faul was known in the tabloid press as the "Provo's Priest". Paradoxically, this hostility to him was also shared by many of the Provisionals who knew of his opposition towards the armed struggle and distrusted him as an uncontrollable independent influence upon the prisoners.³⁴ He wanted to resolve the protest and acted as O'Fiaich's representative. At first Faul acted as an independent spokesperson for the prisoners, gaining better treatment from the press than a PSF spokesperson would. For instance in one case he appeared on Granada Televisions World In Action programme in 1981 to put the prisoner's case.³⁵ This on the other hand in the end did not prevent him helping to end the 1981 strike, after it became clear that the British were not going to give any concessions while the strike was on.

Faul's original view was that if hunger strike was intended to gained better conditions then it was not suicidal or sinful. This changed after the deaths started mounting up and began to become a death strike, with the intention of more and more funerals as publicity events for PSF: this was sinful and in the context an act of

33 During the 1970's Faul together with another priest Fr Raymond Murray wrote and published several pamphlets about human rights abuses in Castlereagh for example *THE CASTLEREAGH FILE* and *H-BLOCK*. Coogan, (1980), vi.

34 Clarke, (1987), 177.

35 *WORLD IN ACTION*, Granada T.V, Manchester, 1981.

violence.³⁶ Before the deaths had started Faul and Murray had published at least one pamphlet in support of the prisoners explaining the reasons behind the hunger strike without condoning it.

Prisoners have few means of protest. When it was clear that the British government intended to go on living up to... being inflexible and more concerned to punish than to seek solutions.

They then went on to say that much as one disagreed with the hunger strike the prisoners felt that they did not have any choice left to them.³⁷

Faul continued his ministry to the prisoners and their relatives, much to the suspicion of Brendan McFarlane the prisoners leader, who rightly guessed that by the end he was trying to persuade the relatives to announce that they would intervene and end the by this stage pointless fast. Faul's example shows the problems faced by the Church as he was under attack for giving ministry to the prisoners. This is vital in all prisons, and is a job which is rightly encouraged by the authorities. But he was regarded with hostility by the media, largely because he had a respectable position but criticised the British government regularly, with an honesty and conviction that could not be easily refuted if his arguments were listened too. Hence the jingoistic treatment he received from the British tabloid newspapers. The Catholic Church was similarly attacked and found itself in a very difficult position.

36 Clarke, (1987), 178.

37 Denis Faul & Raymond Murray, *HUNGER STRIKE- WHY BRITISH RULE HAS FAILED TO SOLVE PRISON PROBLEMS*, PRISON BULLETIN 1981, March 1981.

The Church has a long history of opposition to physical force nationalism, and has at times chosen to directly take on PSF in order to prevent it filling a political vacuum. This has been the case for instance during the 1980's when the Church took on the Provisionals in their heartland of West Belfast, campaigning with what observers described as, "*all the style and vigour of the counter reformation*".³⁸ But a Church has to reflect the views of its congregations, which led to the comments that the English critics disliked.

Much of the criticism came from leading British lay-Catholics who were angered by the role of the Church. The former Labour Party Cabinet Minister (latterly one of the founders of the ill-fated Social Democratic Party) Shirley Williams described the role of the Church in the hunger strikes as amounting to "*an admiration of violence*". While Lord Rawlinson said that he was horrified and ashamed of the statement by Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich which threatened the government with the wrath of the nationalist population if it did not compromise on the prison issue, this was seen as tantamount to supporting the prisoners' aims.³⁹

The establishment broadsheet (quality) papers also carried criticism of the Irish Catholic Church. The *Times* in a carefully balanced leader, which was at pains to attack the bigotry of Protestant extremists such as the

38 John Whyte, *INTERPRETING NORTHERN IRELAND*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 91.

39 *TIMES*, 27 May 1981.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley, said after complimenting the Popes condemnation of violence when visiting Drogheda in 1979.

*Yet the words and actions of some members of the Church have undoubtedly fed misinterpretations of what is happening in Northern Ireland.*⁴⁰

The leader went on to say the Catholic Church and some of its priests had, perhaps unintentionally, in the eyes of the world aligned itself with the strikers and conferred quasi-martyrdom upon the dead men. The leader ended with a call for the Church to condemn terrorism "*without ambiguity or saving clauses*".⁴¹

This was a bit unfair as the senior clergy were divided, and in the case of Dr Daly the Bishop of Derry, totally opposed. On the eve of Sands embarking on his fast Daly had whole-heartedly condemned terrorism, the PIRA, the "dirty" protest, and the hunger strike.⁴² This was perhaps understandably overshadowed by O'Fiaich's some what panicky and frustrated statements immediately before and after Sands' death. When it became clear that the strike was hopeless, and yet continued, the Irish Church increasingly agreed with Daly's views. On the 18 June the Irish Bishops meeting Maynooth College issued a statement ending the ambiguity of the Church's position and firmly condemning the hunger strike.⁴³

However, this did not silence all the critics of the Church. Later in June a British lay-Catholic, Christopher Monckton, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, complimented O'Fiaich upon his anti-PIRA statements but argued that

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 IRISH TIMES, 2 March 1981.

43 TIMES, 19 June 1981.

the hunger strikers deaths were suicides and should be condemned as such. He also argued that as suicides the hunger strikers under Canon 1240 of the Code of Canon law should be refused Christian burial except in the case of a last minute repenting of their sins before death. He said that if this happened there should only be a private burial and not a public one such as the rallies which accompanied the funerals of the hunger strikers.⁴⁴

The criticism of these commentators was often unfair on the Church which found itself in a very difficult position. While condemning the PIRA, as it had always done, the problem remained that the issue of prison conditions commanded a large amount of sympathy from the laity; and a Church is never above but part of a community. On the issue of the burial of suicides the Church has reformed much of its old attitude, in that if it can it prefers to give the dead the benefit of the doubt by allowing burial leaving the decision to God. The Church had attempted to mediate in the prison dispute and was frustrated with the intransigence of the NIO and felt that this was responsible for the fast. Inevitably this meant that the British attracted criticism from the Church, which in the heightened atmosphere of the period meant that such complaints were regarded by the UK media as pro-PIRA, which was not the case.

The Protestant Churches did not have the same problem and so were wholehearted in their attacks upon the hunger strike. The situation in the North has hardened the whole community to death and violence, and

⁴⁴ DAILY TELEGRAPH, 23 June 1981.

when one reflects that the whole Protestant community looks upon the killing of policemen and soldiers as sectarian murders, could one reasonably expect them to feel any sympathy for a Provisional prisoner who might be guilty of murder or attempted murder? The Protestant view was that the hunger strikers at least had a choice over their own deaths, which is more than they ever gave their victims. The Church of Ireland's (Anglican) Bishop of Down and future Primate, Dr Robin Eames, was able to freely denounce the "*calculated blackmail and intimidation*" of the fast.⁴⁵ Whereas, Dr Robert Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury, when visiting the province said,

*You cannot but have sympathy as one Christian to another for the families of hunger strikers. But I have said before that I cannot condone that kind of protest which is bound to create and increase the violent attitudes".*⁴⁶

The more extreme elements among Protestants were not so sympathetic. In reflection of the polarisation that the fast was causing, Ian Paisley, the moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church was performing one of his periodic attempts to form a quasi paramilitary group that was to fight against any possible merger with the Republic, after the Thatcher-Haughey talks. This one, known as the Third Force, was paraded in front of selected journalists at night in the hills of Antrim when pieces of paper (allegedly gun licences) were waved.⁴⁷ This rather unusual Christian response summarised his

45 IRISH TIMES, 11 May 1981.

46 GUARDIAN, 4 June 1981.

47 Reed, (1984), 350-352.

views and that of his constituency in Ulster to the strikers and the situation.

It is unfortunate but not surprising that all the Churches in Ireland chose to reflect the views of their congregations rather than going for a higher ground. But, in the North it is unlikely that any Church could divorce itself from the tribal loyalties of the laity in a situation like the hunger strike. As such the responses were all one could expect, and while not above criticism they are still understandable.

It is difficult to know to what extent the above debate was reflected from within the Maze. In some accounts of the protest Sands was said to have debated the moral aspects of the fast with Faul. It was said he reconciled himself to his likely death with the view that the authorities inflexibility was responsible. However, as the later chapters will show the moral dimension of the fast had not been properly examined by the participants and this was to play a role in the eventual defeat of the strike.

CHAPTER VI

THE 1980 HUNGER STRIKE

6a. INTRODUCTION.

As outlined in earlier chapters, the first hunger strike of 1980 was intended to resolve the prison dispute. The "blanket" and "dirty" protests were grinding on with no end in sight. The NIO, despite the change of party in power in 1979 from Labour to Conservative, was still steadfastly stating that it was not going to give in to the prisoners' demands for "political status", as summarised in the "five demands". As will be discussed in this chapter the British authorities felt that they could not give the necessary concessions, to solve the protest and looked upon the situation as a test of strength where anything other than full submission by either side would not solve the dispute. This led to perhaps excessive belligerence on the part of the authorities which may have been exacerbated by Margaret Thatcher's strong pro-union views and her personal animosity towards republicanism as a result of the murder of her close friend and political ally, Airey Neave, on the eve of her 1979 victory. This was said to have strengthened her belief that one must not negotiate with, let alone give in to terrorists. In this situation it would have been an anathema for her to submit to the demands of convicted criminals.

By 1980 the prisoners had been involved in the dispute from the abolition of special status in 1976. The conditions in which they lived have already been outlined

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earlier and could only be described as atrocious even if self inflicted. It was no surprise that the prisoners were increasingly keen to resolve the dispute. The assassination campaign had not progressed anywhere, it had also failed to gain the required concessions. When the dialogue between Cardinal O'Fiaich and the NIO had broken down, and the verdict in the case brought against the UK government in the European Commission For Human Rights had favoured the government position, the remaining options were limited. In fact, the protesters felt they had no choice but to escalate to a full hunger strike.¹ It was this or continuing the dispute for an indeterminate period, and face the possible collapse of the protest.

Generally, the prisoners were loyal to the northern wing of the Provisionals and were sympathetic to the wing of PSF that was led by Gerry Adams, thus believing in a combined strategy of political action and the armed struggle. This new policy had yet to find an issue with which to launch itself into its constituency. It should also be recalled that PSF had only recently been allowed to operate legally in the Six Counties.

The protest in the gaols had been recognised by some prisoners as an issue with which to launch PSF and its new electoral strategy. However, the policy still needed the boost which the final catalyst of a hunger strike would provide. Indeed, Bobby Sands felt that a hunger strike might even be a repeat of the 1916 rising for the

1 Leo Green, *ON THE BLANKET, AN GLOR GAFA/THE CAPTIVE VOICE*. Belfast: PSF-POW dept, Winter 1990, 17.

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North, in that the treatment of the leadership of the Easter Rising by the authorities had won the sympathy of a considerable amount of previously hostile opinion. This sympathy was then turned into votes by Sinn Fein partly using a "free the prisoners" ticket to gain votes. Sands hoped that a hunger strike would have a similar effect upon the Catholic community in Ulster. Indeed, the number of hunger strikers was consciously chosen to recall the seven leaders executed after the 1916 rising as well as representing each of the six Counties of the North with the seventh prisoner representing the South.²

However, the first hunger strike was to end in panic and confusion, despite its well organised start. The principal controversy was over the agreement secured between the prisoners and the NIO which had resulted in the end of the fast. During the strike negotiations had been conducted both directly and through intermediaries (provided by the Catholic Church). Ultimately, the result was a deal that ended the hunger strike. Problems were to arise though, as both sides interpreted the agreement differently. This resulted in the decision by the prisoners to start the second fast in early 1981 in order to get the British authorities to honour the agreement as they interpreted it.³

This chapter will explore three separate themes: British government prison policy in the province; the aims and hopes of the prisoners; and the agreement to the

2 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, THE H-BLOCKS AND THE RISE OF SINN FAIN**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 124.

3 David Beresford, **TEN MEN DEAD**. London & Glasgow: Grafton Books, 1987, 9-14.

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1980 fast, and will analyse the reasons why both sides had such different interpretations of what was agreed. In section 6b, the interpretation of the prison dispute by the government is explained and examined. Further, the reason why the British adopted such a seemingly inflexible position is considered closely. Section 6c, looks at the actual events of the 1980 fast and the pressures that these placed upon the prisoners and the hunger strikers, especially towards the end of the fast when the men's lives were in danger. In section 6d, the resolution of the first hunger strike is discussed. The factors behind the misunderstandings that followed are also investigated as are the vital periods during Christmas 1980/81 when the decision to restart the fast was taken by the prisoners.

6b. THE BRITISH PRISON POLICY.

The UK government did not view the prison dispute as a struggle for human rights or better prison conditions, but as a struggle by the PIRA for legitimacy as an ethnic independence movement, in the mould of the PLO or the ANC. With some justification the NIO pointed out that conditions in the Maze were amongst the best in Europe, and certainly far better than equivalent high security prisons on the mainland. Most of the prisons in the North were modern and had excellent sporting and educational facilities.⁴

⁴ The two old prisons were Crummlin Road Prison (largely used to house remand prisoners) and the Woman's Prison in Armagh.

Northern Ireland Office, *THE H-BLOCKS, THE FACTS*.
Belfast: NIO Stormont Castle, October 1980.

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The authorities did understand that the paramilitary prisoners from both sides of the sectarian split were hostile to the new prison regime. This was no great surprise but it might be useful to repeat the reasons why the British chose to abolish special status. When he announced the abolition of special status to the House of Commons, the then Northern Ireland Secretary, Merlyn Rees, made it clear that he felt that the abandonment of internment and the abolition of special status were closely linked.⁵ While people were interned without trial one could make a cogent argument that in such a situation prisoners and especially internees could justifiably expect special status. In the mid-1970s the authorities chose to cease internment as an active policy which meant that prisoners were all convicted criminals, though admittedly in the jury-less Diplock courts often using emergency laws. This return to a limited normality meant the British felt that a PIRA or INLA prisoner should be treated as a normal high security prisoner.

The attitude to the "dirty" protest was clearly explained in a statement released by the NIO after criticism from Archbishop Tomas O'Fiaich that had resulted from a visit to the prison in 1978.

These criminals are totally responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. It is they who have been smearing excreta on the walls and pouring their urine through the doors.⁶

This view remained when Rees was replaced by Roy Mason, who was in turn replaced by Humphrey Atkins when Labour lost power. To a large extent Northern Irish policy has

⁵ HANSARD, 16 February 1976, coll 1077-1078.

⁶ Clarke, (1987), 95.

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been a matter of cross-party consensus and in the case of penal policy this was certainly true. It is interesting to note that it was a Labour government that originally sent the troops into Ulster and Labour who abolished special category status, while the Conservative party had introduced it and the ill-fated power sharing executive.⁷ One can speculate whether this consensus would have survived had Airey Neave not been killed by the INLA in March 1979, shortly before the Conservative victory which might possibly have placed him in the NIO.⁸ He was well known as a strong ally of Thatcher and shared her pro-union views combined with a strong right-wing ideological position opposed to the pragmatism of the Labour party and the liberally inclined Conservatives like Humphrey Atkins. Neave may well have made stronger statements but in practice he probably would not have made any difference to the events that actually happened.⁹

Despite its view that the change in regime had been correct, the NIO, by offering concessions such as extra visits, did indicate that it recognised that the dispute had to be solved. This was probably a recognition that in the running of a gaol successfully, protests like the "dirty" and "blanket" protests were a great hindrance.

7 This remained the case even as Bobby Sands was dying in 1981, the Labour Party Northern Ireland spokesman, Don Concannon, visited him in the Maze Prison Hospital to explain that the opposition was in full agreement with government policy. Beresford, (1987), 129.

8 **TIMES**, 19 March 1980.

9 This is said because the British policy was hard line any way in regard to the prisons and it was not until James Prior took over in 1981 that a liberal approach was taken to the prisons.

Martin Dillion, **THE DIRTY WAR**. London: Arrow, 1990, 284-285.

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The cells had to be regularly cleaned, a process which involved the movement of whole wings to new parts of the prison and entailed the use of large numbers of staff. Further, the steam cleaning process which was used to clear up the fouled cells meant that after a few cleans the cells had to be re-painted. Meanwhile, outside the prisons the PIRA was continuing to assassinate prison staff, a tragic loss of life which obviously affected the warders morale. Added to this the cost of protecting them was also great and imposed an increase in the workload of the security forces.

However, the government felt that their hands were tied as they did not believe there was a consensus in the North that would allow them to come up with a compromise face saving formula such as the one adopted at Portlaoise Prison in the Republic after a similar prison protest campaign in 1977. The unionists at this time had an effective veto on prison policy. The government felt that granting special category status had been a mistake that was rectified by Rees, and that Protestant opinion would oppose any repetition of this mistake.¹⁰

As the prison dispute worsened, the UK was prepared to show some willingness to negotiate on minor issues but would not give way upon the separate status of paramilitary prisoners. During 1980, O'Fiaich and Atkins were involved in a dialogue in an attempt to resolve the issue before a hunger strike started with the deadlines which this would present. The authorities were prepared

10 Tim Pat Coogan, **ON THE BLANKET-THE H-BLOCK STORY.** Swords, Co.Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 196-197.

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to negotiate through third parties such as the Church, the SDLP, and relatives groups.¹¹ In fact the only people that they would not talk to were the Provisionals. But as 1980 progressed according to one source close to the PIRA, David Beresford, this was to change.

In March 1980 Atkins had emphasised that the government's resolution to break the protest continued. He announced at Westminster that newly convicted prisoners who had committed crimes before 1 March 1976 no longer had the option of special status. Later, on 23 March, minor concessions were made that allowed inmates to wear prison sports gear rather than uniform during exercise periods and the number of letters allowed to prisoners was quadrupled to one per week.¹²

The next British concession occurred at the end of August, when Atkins gave the protesting prisoners the same rights to compassionate parole as conforming prisoners. They also had the option of closed visits where the prisoners were separated from visitors by a screen. This meant that the prisoner did not need to be searched before and after the visit.¹³ However, the talks between O'Fiaich and Atkins collapsed. This resulted in the PIRA's attacks upon prison officers being resumed and led to the decision to embark upon a hunger strike on the 27 October 1980.¹⁴

11 Clarke, (1987), 113 - 114.

12 Kevin J. Kelley, **THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE I.R.A.** London: Zed Books, 1988, 325.

& Clarke, (1987), 114.

13 Clarke, (1987), 119.

14 **TIMES**, 28 October 1980.

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In October, before the hunger strike had started, but after its announcement, partly because of the mild criticism from the European Commission for Human Rights, the British offered to substitute civilian style clothing for a uniform. This was rejected by the prisoners as they wanted to wear their own clothing, not what they saw as a different type of uniform. Besides, there was no movement on the other issues that were in the "five demands" that the protesters demanded, especially not on the differentiation between the paramilitary and criminal prisoners.¹⁵ The government would not publicly moderate its position against the prisoners after the start of the 1980 strike. Indeed, a statement issued by the NIO mentioned that it would not grant status to prisoners who had committed criminal acts of terrorism.¹⁶

In his account of the protest David Beresford claims that the government was actually moderating its attitude by talking with the PIRA. During the latter stages of the hunger strike, when at least one man on hunger strike, Sean McKenna, was approaching his death, a meeting was arranged between representatives of both sides under strict conditions of secrecy. The initial contact was arranged by Catholic Churchmen who may or may not have had official sanction. Beresford states that the government was represented by the Foreign Office (probably the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS) while PIRA sent a senior member to argue its side. They eventually met in late December as the threat of the

15 Kelley, (1988), 325.
& Clarke, (1987), 124.
16 Kelley, (1988), 326.

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first death was looming. The meeting was held at Aldergrove airport (now Belfast International) near Antrim. The Army Council was given a copy of a face saving solution which the NIO was proposing. It was arranged for the representative to visit the prison, but the abandonment of the strike preceded him and the Army Council's advice to the prisoners on their response.¹⁷ Unfortunately the nature of the above negotiations are such that it will be many years before any confirmation of the above story will become available. Until then we must treat it with a great amount of caution.

On 17 December the NIO had announced that it was preparing a compromise proposal but mentioned that the proposed reforms would not be implemented unless the hunger strike was abandoned. On 18 December, in the knowledge of this statement, the secret talks, and the imminent death of Sean McKenna, the remaining five lucid hunger strikers chose to call the fast off.¹⁸

The abandonment of the strike gave the advantage to the government. The proposed face saving proposal was a variant of the October concession of civilian style clothing. This was felt by the PIRA to be a useful start in the negotiations but by no means a solution.¹⁹ Needless to say this view was not shared by 10 Downing Street, which by this time was controlling the response to the crisis. After the fast was abandoned the government was no longer prepared to discuss reforms, probably feeling with some justice that it was unlikely

17 Beresford, (1987), 9-13.

18 Kelley, (1988), 327.

19 Beresford, (1987), 44.

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that the hunger strike could be repeated again. However, the government had underestimated the importance placed on the prisons by the Provisionals, and especially the still insecure northerners who badly needed a success for their new political direction. Thus the seeds of the 1981 hunger strike were already being sown, even before the 1980 fast had been properly finished.

6c. THE FIRST HUNGER STRIKE.

The possibility of a hunger strike had been worrying all of those involved in the protest for some time. Indeed, the prisoners had as early as 1979 discussed the option with the outside leadership. The leadership had counselled against such a move for in the words of Gerry Adams the leadership was "*tactically, strategically, physically and morally opposed*" to a hunger strike.²⁰ As it is widely thought that Adams was also the Chief of Staff of the PIRA,²¹ this would not have been advice but a direct military order. The Green Book, which contains the rules and regulations of the Provisionals, lists embarking upon a hunger strike by a volunteer without the permission of the outside leadership as an offence with a maximum penalty of dismissal from the organisation.²² Both Bobby Sands and Brendan Hughes the prison OCs, were sympathetic to Gerry Adams and the northern wing of PIRA, so they would not disobey a direct order from him.

20 Clarke, (1987), 121.

21 Edgar O'Ballance, *IRA LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS*, Paul Wilkinson (ed) *BRITISH PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, 79.

22 The *GREEN BOOK*, is published as an appendix to Dillon, (1990), 482-496.

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The protest by the autumn of 1980 had not extracted anything concrete out of the British. The National H-Block Committee, which was formed after a conference at the Green Briar Hotel, had been able to mobilise significant displays of public support and international attention. At the same time PIRA had been conducting its assassination campaign against prison employees for several years and had yet to show any real progress from this front. The involvement of the Catholic Church in influencing the government had also been harnessed, and despite the involvement of even the Cardinal it had failed to change the treatment of prisoners. The involvement of the Irish government had also been similarly unsuccessful. The final straw that broke that camel's back had been the rejection of the "blanketmen's" case by the European Commission of Human Rights. The republican movement now felt that it had only two options left; complete defeat or to embark upon a hunger strike.

The PIRA, who had not achieved a political successes since the fall of Stormont, and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in 1972, were in no position to contemplate defeat. Especially after the recent rise to power of the politicised northerners who had been so critical of the old Dublin based leadership.

Within the prisons the "blanketmen" were similarly determined to see the protest through. They felt that they had endured so much in the appalling conditions of the "dirty" protest that failure would be a betrayal of

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themselves and their supporters outside. Thus, as Leo Green said, they had "*In effect, no choice at all*".²³

In the late summer of 1980 the prison OC, Brendan Hughes, chose to ask for volunteers prepared to embark upon a fast to the death. On 27 September it was announced in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* that the dialogue between O'Fiaich and Daly with Atkins had finally ended in deadlock.²⁴ It was then that a statement, smuggled out of the H-Blocks on 10 October, announced that a hunger strike would commence from the 27 October. The strikers, interestingly, did not claim the "five demands" that had been recently called for by the prisoners but, "*... as of right, political recognition and that we be accorded the status of political prisoners*".²⁵

Why had the prisoners chosen to revert back to the 1976 demands? Possibly, they were showing the republican movement's growing political maturity, in choosing to opt for a demand that they knew was unacceptable to the British government as a negotiating ploy in the hope of reaching a compromise agreement. Conversely, it might have been an indication of naivete, in that the prisoners may have hoped that once they had embarked upon a hunger strike the government would cave in as they had in 1972 when special status was won. One could also speculate that they were simply emphasizing their position to show that minor reforms were not going to solve the dispute

23 Leo Green, (1990), 17.

24 David Reed, *IRELAND THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION*. London: Larkin Press, 1984, 326.

25 Clarke, (1987), 123.

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and give the government a reminder that they opposed any thing that smacked of "criminalisation". However, the most likely answer was that the idea of using the strike as a catalyst for the protests outside the prison needed a short snappy demand that could be readily understood by the public rather than using their rather complicated formula for negotiations.

The names of the seven hunger strikers were released. Brendan Hughes was to lead the strike as OC, though he shared this title with Tom McFeeley, in case he deteriorated at a faster rate. This ensured that there would be a strike leader at all times. The other five were Sean McKenna, Leo Green, Tommy McKearney, Raymond McCartney, and the INLA prison OC John Nixon.²⁶

The number of men was chosen as a symbol of the seven leaders of the 1916 rising who had been subsequently executed by the British.²⁷ Strategically, the Provisionals made two mistakes. All the strikers started on the same day, meaning that the protest had only a very limited period before they all died. It was also a mistake to allow the fast to be commanded by a striker. This was to have a great significance later on when the strike was in its final stages and the prisoners were too weak to make the important decision on whether to continue or accept the deal offered by the government.

The involvement of the INLA in an essentially Provisional protest demonstrated not only the wish of the outside leadership for the issue to be part of an anti-

²⁶ *TIMES*, 28 October 1980.

²⁷ Clarke, (1987), 124.

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unionist coalition (as with the National H-Block/Armagh Committee) but also the camaraderie between the republican prisoners. The PIRA were in a sufficiently dominant position both inside and outside the prison that they could afford to allow the INLA some of the recognition that the protest would give.

When the prisoners first refused their food on 27 October 1980 they could not have had very strong hopes of a settlement. The government had refused to move on the prisons issue despite the "dirty" and "blanket" protests, the PIRA's assassination campaign, and the rallies organised by sympathisers.²⁸ What could they have hoped for? Over a decade after the strike it is still difficult to find an answer to this question. By their later actions it is clear that they had not intended to die simply to fuel the protest with funerals. It is most likely that they hoped to gain international attention for their demand of political status. This was probably in the hope that the British government would be sufficiently embarrassed into giving them their demands.

Further, they were almost certainly hoping to pressurize the British authorities indirectly through the Republic's government. It was known to the prisoners that the new Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, was keen to test himself in the polls, in the hope that an election would confirm him as the undisputed leader of Fianna Fail and the country. The prisons issue would have been judged by Haughey as a divisive single issue that could upset his calculations on when to dissolve the Oireachtas. This

²⁸ Kelley, (1988), 326.

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fear would be born out in a lead article in *An Phoblact/Republican News*.

...the British collaborators in the leadership of Fianna Fail and the SDLP are going to quake in their shoes and go crawling to their British masters pleading with them to grant the prisoners' five demands on a humanitarian basis in order to restore 'normality'.²⁹

But if they thought this was the case they were mistaken. Margaret Thatcher, an uncompromisingly anti-terrorist and pro-union politician would have been unlikely to change a policy that was based on principle, to help the leader of a party known to be hostile to the British presence in Ulster. She was not a believer in pragmatic politics anyway, certainly not when it could be avoided.

Why would the prisoners labour under such a misconception? It is very possible that the prisoners actually believed their own propoganda that classified the Republic as a neo-colonial regime. If this was the case the protesters might have accepted that the British government might change policy in order to stop the rise in republican activity in the South.

The probable answer is that the Provisionals, had never come across an ideologically driven Prime Minister who was by nature confrontational and combative. It seems that the Provisionals seriously misjudged the situation.³⁰

Essentially, the Provisionals were expecting the government to act in a similar manner to the previous regimes that they had encountered. If this was the case

29 *AN PHOBLACT/REPUBLICAN NEWS*, 1 November 1980, quoted in Reed, (1984), 338.

30 Clarke, (1987), 99.

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an extraordinary misjudgement by Michael Alison, the NIO Minister responsible for the prisons, would have helped to make them think that a fast could be successful. During an interview broadcast by Ulster Television, in its Counterpoint documentary of the 24 September 1980, he admitted the reason for the granting of special status in 1972.

Special category status was won not just by a hunger strike, it was won by the enormous outburst of lawlessness, concentrated like a dam bursting into a particular moment in history which made it impossible to build in our prisons, to introduce a normal prison regime.³¹

This would have encouraged the Provisionals to think that the situation was not very different in 1980 to 1972. However, the level of violence in 1972 was far higher than in 1980. Also after over a decade of civil strife in Northern Ireland the police and army were in a far better position to deal with any unrest in the Province than in 1972.³² Further, the authorities only gave special category status as part of the PIRA conditions for a cease-fire. The hunger strike was only one factor among many in the mind of the government.³³ In 1980, there was no British interest in a truce or negotiations, and this time it was the Provisionals who were under pressure.

In early November the hunger strikers had been transferred to individual cells in the "A" wing of Block Three (H-3) in the Maze. Inside there had also been an

31 Reed, (1984), 335.

32 According to RUC figures, 1972 was the worst year for violence resulting in; 10,628 shootings and 467 deaths. But by 1980 this had fallen to; 642 shootings and seventy-six deaths.

RUC, STATISTICAL INFORMATION, 1969-31 JANUARY 1991. Belfast: 1991.

33 Reed, (1984), 335.

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increase in the number of prisoners who were "on the blanket" to approximately five hundred men.³⁴

At the end of November, as the prisoners ended the first month of their fast, the news from outside the prison had been good to a point. In Dublin a pro-H-Block demonstration had attracted 12,000 people, and southern opinion had been split down the middle over the protest (far higher than support for the armed struggle). The leader of the SDLP, John Hume, had also become sufficiently concerned about the issue to arrange a meeting with the PIRA in Dublin to discuss it.³⁵ But the British government remained unmoved by any of this.

The Provisionals thought that the time had come to escalate the pressure upon the British government from within the prisons again. It was decided to increase the number of people on the fast with the addition of three female prisoners from Armagh Prison on 1 December, the same day that the male hunger strikers were transferred to the hospital wing of the Maze Prison.³⁶ The female hunger strikers were the republican OC of Armagh, Mairead Farrell, along with Mary Doyle, and Mairead Nugent.³⁷ The reasoning behind this move was fairly simple: Irish society has a very strong masculine character with a corresponding patronizingly protective instinct to women. This meant that although the fast by the seven men was bad enough when three women also went on strike it became horrific for many people. The argument was that

34 Ibid 340.

35 Clarke, (1987), 125.

36 **TIMES**, 1 & 2 December 1980.

37 Tim Pat Coogan, **THE IRA**. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988, 618.

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conditions must be bad to drive women to do this, and how could the authorities allow the women to die?³⁸

At this stage the prisoners heard that John Hume had received the support of all the parties in the Dail for an approach to the UK authorities on a face saving deal that was designed to try and resolve the issue without either side having to compromise their position too much. This was to be based on the European Commission of Human Rights' advice that the government should find an acceptable prison regime. The protesters' demands were to be met with regard to uniforms and association, this was essentially the lowest acceptable compromise to the republican movement. However, it was turned down by Humphrey Atkins, who on 4 December released a statement outlining the governments opposition to the "five demands", acceptance of which he felt would sacrifice control within the prison to the Provisionals, and also in some measure legitimate the terrorist organisations.³⁹

During both the 1980 and 1981 strikes there was never a lack of potential negotiators between the authorities and the prisoners. Aside from the Irish government, the Redemptorist priest Fr Reid had been important in getting John Hume's involvement. There had also been the involvement of journalists like Tim Pat Coogan, the editor of the Irish Press, who used his good contacts and standing to try to help negotiate a solution.⁴⁰ But despite this there was no common ground

38 Kelley, (1988), 326.

See also Chapter IV(d).

39 Clarke, (1987), 125.

40 Tim Pat Coogan, **DISILLUSIONED DECADES, IRELAND 1966-87**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 230.

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on which both sides could meet. Neither was prepared to change their position.

On 8 December, Thatcher and Haughey held a summit that concentrated on security and the discussion of "*possible new institutional structures*" for the Thirty-two Counties. This statement did not reflect Haughey's earlier declarations that the hunger strike was the most important political issue in Ireland.⁴¹ Despite the possibilities of the statement the hunger strike managed to become the principal factor in Anglo/Irish affairs at this time.⁴²

Then on 10 December, it seemed that the deadlock in negotiations might be broken. The leading civil servant responsible for the prisons in the North, John Belloch, visited the Maze Prison and spoke to the protesters. He outlined the various concessions, which the NIO had offered to the prisoners which they could take up as soon as they ended both the "dirty" protest and the fast. This was interpreted by the Provisionals as an authoritative statement of the British policy position. They also regarded the openings made by John Hume and the Roman Catholic Church as the manner in which they could relay their answers.⁴³

At this stage Sean McKenna's condition was deteriorating at an alarming rate. It became clear that despite over a year's contemplation of a fast, the prisoners were not psychologically prepared for the death

41 Kelley, (1988), 327.

42 Clarke, (1987), 126.

43 Ibid, 126-127.

& Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 360-361.

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of one of the men. Additionally, the authorities showed that they were prepared to see the death through.

In an effort to heighten the pressure upon the authorities it was decided to announce a further increase in the number of hunger strikers in the Maze. On 15 December, twenty-three men joined the fast followed by seven more on the next day. This meant that a total of forty prisoners were now on strike in the H-Blocks and Armagh.⁴⁴ McKenna had, after fifty-one days on strike, become blind, and was reaching the final stages of starvation before death. By Wednesday 17 December, he was incapable of keeping drinking water down.⁴⁵

On the same day the NIO stated that a compromise solution might be possible, but that this could only be considered after the strike was called off. The strikers consulted the OC of the Blocks (Bobby Sands) to see whether they could call the strike off in order to save McKenna's life on terms based on the British offer.⁴⁶

The following day Humphrey Atkins postponed a statement that he had been due to deliver to the House of Commons. A copy of his proposed statement was given to each of the seven original hunger strikers in the prison hospital along with a thirty-two page document which outlined the prison rules. The five hunger strikers who were still in a fit enough condition now faced the unenviable decision over whether or not to give up the strike on the basis of the proposed statement.⁴⁷

44 **TIMES**, 16 December 1980.

45 Reed, (1984), 344.

46 Kelley, (1988), 326-327.

47 Reed, (1984), 344.

& Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 360-362.

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McKenna's condition was extremely serious. He was only occasionally lucid and on the verge of a coma. When, in one of his few conscious moments, he asked how long he still had to live, he was informed that his death was expected within twenty-four hours. He then restated his wish to continue with the strike. The prisoners were presented with a situation where it seemed an acceptable solution was possible; but a civil servant who was to meet them and clarify the situation was held up by a day in London. The delay would have been fatal for McKenna and the prisoners chose to call off the strike.⁴⁸

As the victory fires burned in the Nationalist areas of the North, McKenna, suffering from potassium deficiency, was transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast and admitted into the intensive care unit in a still dangerous condition. In Armagh the three women chose to give up their fast as did a small loyalist imitation hunger strike which had been called in protest at the religious integration of Ulsters prison system.⁴⁹

6d. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE FIRST HUNGER STRIKE:-

The panic caused by the condition of McKenna was to lead indirectly to a second strike in 1981. A fair amount of controversy has dogged the debate about what was agreed by the British authorities and the prisoners in December 1980. There has been much talk of "perfidious Albion", but little agreement on the correct interpretation of the wording which the civil servants,

48 Gerry Adams, *THE POLITICS OF IRISH FREEDOM*. Dingle, Co.Kerry: Brandon Books, 1987, 77-78.

& Coogan, (1988), 620-625.

49 Clarke, (1987), 128-129.

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with bureaucratic vagueness, had put together. In this section the intention is to examine the compromise and see why it failed.

The Guardian Northern Ireland correspondent at this time, David Beresford, subsequently wrote an account of the 1981 hunger strike named *Ten Men Dead*. With a journalist's eye for drama, the book opens with the cloak and dagger way that the proposed solution was delivered to a representative of the PIRA Army Council at Aldergrove (now Belfast International) Airport. When the document arrived at the Belfast offices of PSF a member of the Council is reported to have stated that the document was full of holes but was nonetheless a good start in any possible negotiations. The deliberations are cut short though, by the announcement that the fast had been called off.⁵⁰

It would be useful at this stage to restate the "five demands" that the republican prisoners were demanding. They were,

1. The right to wear their own clothes.
2. The right to abstain from penal labour.
3. The right to free association.
4. The right to educational and recreational activities in conjunction with the prison authorities.
5. The right to have remission restored.⁵¹

50 Beresford, (1987), 44-45.

51 Coogan, (1980), 48.

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The government proposed that "*Republican Prisoners*" coming off the protest would be placed in clean cells and that,

within a few days clothing provided by their families will be given to any prisoner giving up his protest so that they can wear it during association and visits.

During the working day in the prison they were to be issued with "*civilian type clothing*". Further, prisoners were to be permitted to associate within each wing in the evening and at the weekends when they could wear their own clothing. There would also be the arrival in the prison the following day of a senior civil servant to discuss the proposals.⁵²

This meant that of the "five demands" point one was partially addressed, giving prisoners the right to their own clothes when not working. Point two was not going to be possible and the prisoners would have to work, but the government offered to regard the definition of work liberally. Although point three was largely acceptable, the authorities were to remain in full control of the prison: there would be no return to the old prisoner-run huts of the special category period. Point four was already possible under existing regulations if they were sympathetically interpreted by the prison administration. While point five was not going to be given in total, 50% of the lost remission time would be restored. And while there was no recognition of political status the government seemed to be prepared to describe them as

52 Clarke, (1987), 128.
& Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 360-362.
& Coogan, (1988), 619.

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Republican Prisoners. This was a substantial improvement to previous British offers. For the first time at least some of the most important parts of the "five demands" of the "blanketmen" were addressed directly.

Initially, after the protest had been abandoned the situation did seem to be resolving itself. Bobby Sands had several meetings with the Governor of the Maze, Stanley Hilditch, and met with a senior civil servant. The atmosphere changed though in a matter of days. The Provisionals claim the Governor said that there would be no movement until the prisoners on the "blanket" protest conformed. Then on 9 January 1981, Atkins announced that the prisoners would not receive their own clothing. Instead the prisoners would only have "*civilian type*" clothing as issued by the authorities.⁵³

The prisoners decided to attempt to conform although there was resistance from some prisoners, especially from the INLA, to put on the old uniforms, even temporarily. It was agreed that ninety-six men from H-5 and H-3 would slop out for a week to prove that they were conforming. They would then instantly qualify for 50% of their lost remission and one parcel a week. The following week they would wash, shave, and ask for their own clothing. The government asked for a week longer. On Friday 23 January 1981, twenty of the ninety-six prisoners shaved and asked for their clothing, but emphasised that they would not do any prison work except clean their own cells and attend full-time education. But the authorities said that they

53 Reed, (1984), 345.

& Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 360-362.

& Beresford, (1987), 46-47.

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were first to pick up prison issue clothing and move to furnished cells. By 27 January, the ninety-six prisoners had rioted causing £13,000 worth of damage and had started to foul their cells again.⁵⁴ The situation seemed to be deteriorating, with the government hoping that the numbers of protesting prisoners would be reduced to a small hard core.⁵⁵

Who broke their word? Predictably, both sides claimed that it was the other. The authorities seemed determined to ensure that the prisoners conformed first before there could be any resolution of the dispute. The prisoners were equally strong in their wish not to conform at all to the old system. It was certain that the deal that led to the end of the 1980 fast was not the one republicans wanted, and that they had hoped to be able to continue negotiations after the strike was over. However, the British authorities had not wanted to negotiate such a compromise in the first place and once the pressure of the fast had been lifted, decided that there was no longer a need to continue discussions. The acceptance by the hunger strikers of the deal was understandable as they did not want to see the unnecessary death of a comrade. This, combined with the problems suffered by the strikers after over fifty days without food, meant that they should not have made the decision to call off the fast themselves. It was for this the reason that in 1981 the Provisionals chose to keep the prisoners under the normal prison command led by a non-hunger striker,

54 Clarke, (1987), 135.

& Coogan, (1988), 625-626.

55 Clarke, (1987), 135-136.

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Brendan McFarlane. Had the British been a bit more flexible after the end of 1980 it is likely that the 1981 fast would not have been necessary and that the problems caused internationally, and within the Province, would never have happened.

It has been stated that the Provisionals might have found an excuse to restart the fast again, had the deal worked, in order to launch the use of the Armalite and Ballot Box strategy. This was unlikely as PSF was unsure whether it was possible to regain the momentum of the outside protest again.⁵⁶ The outside leadership was also aware of the past history of Irish hunger strikes. This meant it was fully aware of how much this technique had proved to be a double edged sword in the past and that it was notoriously difficult to control once started. Given PSF's wish to be in command of events it would almost certainly have preferred to use a different issue with which to launch itself upon electoral politics.

⁵⁶ Kelley, (1988), 333.
& Coogan, (1988), 615.

CHAPTER VII

THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKE

7a. INTRODUCTION.

The confusion at the end of the 1980 hunger strike had resulted in a determination amongst the Provisionals that this time they would not make the same mistakes. The hopes for the successful resolution of the strike without any deaths this time must have been remote in the extreme. The experience of 1980 had shown that the authorities while prepared to try and resolve the strike they were also willing to allow a prisoner to die, as in the case of Sean McKenna. This would turn the moral pressure that the authorities were supposed to suffer from back upon the prisoners and republicanism. This meant that the prisoners had to be psychologically prepared for a death. Rather than having a multiple hunger strike as in 1980, which was recognised as a tactical mistake, they chose to have a series of lone fasts starting at two week periods, steadily building up the pressure upon the authorities.¹ This was to lead to a protracted period of tension in the Province through much of 1981.

It is not the intention of this chapter to deal with the two aspects of the strike that have already been dealt with in Chapters IV and V, so the external campaign will only be analysed when it had a direct input to the events during the fast and the moral and ethical aspects will

¹ Kevin J. Kelley, *THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRA*. London: Zed Books, 1990, 333-334.

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also only be touched upon. Section 7b is a summary of the principal events of the 1981 strike in chronological order. This will be followed in section 7c by an examination of the reaction to the strike amongst the parties in Northern Ireland.

7b. THE 1981 HUNGER STRIKE.

After the confusion following the end of the 1980 hunger strike the Provisionals were determined to ensure that the mistakes made then would not be repeated again. This resulted in a series of communications between the Army Council and the Maze prisoners about the possibility of starting the hunger strike again. The Council was extremely anxious to avoid the confusion that had ended the 1980 fast. The PIRA also made it clear that there would be no run down of the level of violence as there had been in 1980 if there was a new hunger strike.²

It was decided that the men on the fast would come under the normal prison command structure, which effectively meant that they were under the command of Brendan "Bic" McFarlane, who was to take Bobby Sands place as PIRA prison OC. The prisoners were informed that the strike would probably lead to the death of at least some of the men taking part. This allowed the movement to come to terms with the idea of deaths and address the psychological barrier which the earlier hunger strikers could not cross and which had ended the first hunger strike. It was also decided that rather than a mass strike like 1980, which brought the problem to a crisis

² Colm Keena, *A BIOGRAPHY OF GERRY ADAMS*. Cork & Dublin: Mercier Press, 1990, 89.

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point in relatively short period, this time the numbers would be in ones and twos, thus ensuring that the pressure could be maintained as each man approached death over a drawn out period, maximising the political mileage of every death.³

There was also the problem of morale within the prison amongst the "blanketmen". Between the end of the 1980 strike on 18 December and 3 March 1981, eighty prisoners had dropped out of the protest.⁴ If this rate of attrition was allowed to continue the whole protest would collapse, so the Provisionals faced the problem that if they did nothing there would no longer be a protest.

The republican movement outside the prisons decided to carefully plan a campaign in support of the fast. PSF was worried that the level of emotion at the end of the 1980 strike might have drained possible support in the community for the fast. On the 25 January 1981, the National H-Block/Armagh Committee met in Dublin to prepare for the start of Sands' strike. It was decided that the committee should put across its view that the government had backed away from an honourable solution to the dispute after the pressure of the 1980 strike was lifted. A theme of "*Britain Reneges*" was to be adopted and fed to the public as much as possible.⁵ This would deflect any criticism that they might receive alleging that the republican movement was responsible for any resulting deaths. They hoped this would safely put the

3 Kelley, (1990), 333-334.

4 HANSARD, 3 March 1981, colls 131-134.

5 Kelley, (1990), 330.

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blame upon the British. Leaflets distributed in the Republic by the National Committee, emphasised the idea that the authorities had betrayed the agreement specifically on the issue of prison uniform. *"Clothes brought to the gaols by relatives were refused by the authorities and parcels were not allowed".*⁶

In a similar way, propaganda that was distributed in the United Kingdom did not pull any punches in descriptions of the government's attitude to the prisoners. *"The government has broken its agreement with Irish republican prisoners... The prisoners have been forced to hunger strike again."*

The Committee also decided that the "dirty" protest would be called off on 2 March, the day after Sands was due to start his hunger strike. This was to concentrate further attention upon the fast, though the better conditions would also have helped general morale amongst protesting prisoners and help keep former conforming prisoners who had joined the protest in 1980 amongst the "blanketmen".⁸

The British authorities, though, were announcing to the world that they would not back down over their refusal to concede any form of political status. The hunger strike which Bobby Sands started on 1 March 1981, was not going to affect the issue, according to a speech which the Secretary of State, Humphrey Atkins, made to the Commons the day after the fast began.⁹ In his

6 *BRITISH RENEGE ON HUNGER STRIKE COMMITMENTS*. National H-Block/Armagh Committee, 30 Mountjoy Sqr, Dublin, 1981.

7 *AD-HOC HUNGER STRIKE COMMITTEE*. London NW5 4NH, 1981.

8 *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 3 March 1981.

9 *IRISH TIMES*, 4 March 1981.

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statement Atkins was emphatic that the strike would not be successful.

The claim for political status has been rejected in clear terms by the European Commission of Human Rights, by successive governments, and by both sides of the house.¹⁰

Speaking for the Opposition the Labour MP for Mansfield, J. Don Concannon, concurred with the Secretary of State. *"We agree that this is the only sensible course for the house to take"*. He went on to say to the Commons that he did not wish to make an issue of this situation and did not want any potential propaganda to be given to the Provisionals by the Labour Party. *"...we shall not be pressing him to make further statements, in fact quite the reverse".¹¹*

This was not a great surprise to Sands (nor the republican movement) who wrote in his diary that. *"It [the Atkins statement] does not annoy me, because my mind was prepared for such things and I know I can expect more of such, right to the bitter end."¹²*

Bobby Sands was a rather sad figure. His family had been burnt out of their home during the early part of the "troubles", and this had probably drawn him to the paramilitaries. He was separated from his wife, who with his son had moved to the mainland. After his second arrest in 1976, he had distinguished himself in prison as a writer and was close to Gerry Adams' wing of the Provisionals. In the late 1970's, he had acted as Brendan Hughes' deputy, and during the 1980 hunger strike was the

¹⁰ HANSARD, 3 March 1981, colls 131-134.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Extracts from a leaflet released by Provisional Sinn Fein published in the GUARDIAN, 23 June 1981.

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OC of the PIRA prisoners (an elected position).¹³ With his experience it is certain that he realised that he would probably die, which meant that he was a good choice to lead the strike from the front, fully aware of the consequences from the start.

Two weeks later, as planned, the second hunger striker Frances Hughes started his fast. Hughes, unlike Sands, had been an important figure in the PIRA. Before his capture he had been notorious in South Co. Londonderry for his daring in fighting the security forces. He had been shot during his capture, was found guilty of the murder of a soldier and was estimated by some commentators to have been involved in over thirty killings.¹⁴ Unlike Sands he was representative of the more conservative republican tradition which was still strong in the rural areas on the boarder with the Republic.¹⁵

Outside the prison as Sands went into the fourth week of his strike the National H-Block/Armagh Committee was drumming up support. On 22 March two more prisoners embarked upon a fast. They were Raymond McCreesh (PIRA) and Patsy O'Hara (INLA). This was intended to ensure that there would be continuous pressure on the authorities as each man approached death.¹⁶ When a by-election was caused by the death of the sitting Independent

13 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, SINN FEIN AND THE H-BLOCKS**. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 121-123.

14 David Beresford, **TEN MEN DEAD**, London: Grafton, 1987, 152.

& Kelley, (1990), 333-334.

& **IRISH TIMES**, 13 May 1981.

15 Beresford, (1987), 152.

16 **IRISH TIMES**, 23 March 1981.

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Nationalist MP, Frank Maguire, in the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, an ideal propaganda tool was given to the committee. On the 9 April Sands won the seat and became a member of the House of Commons, as discussed in Chapter IV and in the next section. Many nationalists hoped that this would lead to some form of compromise from the government, but this was not the case.¹⁷ The British government had decided that the strike had become a trial of strength as well as principle, which could decide much of the future of British policy in the North and so they could not afford to show any weakness to the Provisionals.

By 20 April Sands was approaching death, as a result tension increased throughout the North. The security forces naturally became targets for crowds of youths in republican areas. During a riot in Belfast two Catholic youths were killed by an army landrover which had knocked them over at high speed.¹⁸ This reflected the general polarisation that was being created by the fast. The enclave mentality of the late 1960's and early 1970's was returning to the province.¹⁹ There had been some criticism of the army and the RUC for their heavy presence in nationalist areas. It was argued that their presence incited the rioters and that if they were not in the ghettos there would be no riots. The security forces though were undoubtedly concerned to prevent a recreation of the no go areas that had existed at the start of the

17 **TIMES**, 11 April 1981.

18 **TIMES**, 20 April 1981.

& **GUARDIAN**, 20 April 1981.

19 **GUARDIAN**, 2 May 1981.

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troubles and were unwilling to allow barricades to go up. Further, the authorities could not allow any perception that they had lost control of even the most republican areas of the Six Counties, so a heavy police and army presence in these districts was imperative from the authorities' point of view.

On 5 May, the NIO released a statement stating that Bobby Sands, "*took his own life by refusing food for 66 days*".²⁰ He had died at 1.17 in the morning in the Maze Prison hospital. One of the first reactions to the death was released by Atkins who indicated that BRITISH policy would not change despite the death when he said. "*I regret this needles and pointless death. Too many have died by violence in Northern Ireland. In this case it was self inflicted.*"²¹

The republican prisoners also released a similarly uncompromising statement which illustrated how far from a solution the problem had come. "*There are many Bobby Sands in these Blocks, and we will continue to die on hunger strike if needs be in order to safeguard those principles [Political Status].*"²²

However, it seems that internally the prisoners were not quite so blase' as the statement indicated. In one communication from McFarlane (Bik) to Adams (Brownie) we see a better example of the atmosphere in the Blocks.

To Brownie 2.15 A.M
Comrade mor, I just heard the news I'm shattered-
just can't believe it. This is a terrible feeling I have.
I don't even know what to say. Comrade, I'm sorry, but I
just can't say anything else. May God in his infinite

20 GUARDIAN, 5 May 1981.

21 Ibid.

22 IRISH TIMES, 7 May 1981.

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*mercy grant eternal rest to his soul. Jesus Christ
protect and guide us all.*

*God Bless.
xoxo Bik xoxo*

The bitter determination came later in the day when in another communication to a PSF official, he said, "*Let's stay together comrade and hammer the bastards into the ground.*"²³

The other major parties in the North also issued statements about the death. The DUP leader Ian Paisley reflected the general view of the Unionist parties when he simply said that Sands had a choice not afforded the PIRA's victims. This low key response fitted in with their opinion that the international media had been biased in the favour of the hunger strikers and that it was not concentrating on the victims of Provisional violence. John Hume the leader of the moderate nationalist party the SDLP complained that Sands' death could have been avoided if the government had been more flexible and sensitive.²⁴

Almost immediately after the death of Sands had been publicly announced, there was rioting in the republican areas of the Province as well as in parts of Dublin where targets like British Home Stores were attacked and marchers had to be beaten back from the British Embassy by the Garda. During the disorder in Ulster twenty-one people were injured, including a milkman and his son who were stoned by youths on a morning milk round.²⁵

23 Prison Communications published in Beresford, (1987), 133 - 135.

24 GUARDIAN, 6 May 1981.

25 GUARDIAN, 6 May 1981.

& INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, 6 May 1981.

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Subsequently, both died as a result of their injuries which had been sustained when the float crashed.²⁶

When Bobby Sands was buried on 7 May, the number of mourners was estimated by the Times as between 50,000 and 70,000, while republican sympathisers claimed 100,000 mourners.²⁷ The polarisation between the two communities was illustrated when unionists held a form of counter ceremony at which the 2000 victims of the troubles were commemorated at the cenotaph in Belfast city centre.²⁸

On 9 May the treadmill of new hunger strikes continued when Joe McDonnell a thirty year old PIRA prisoner started to fast.²⁹ As Francis Hughes' condition deteriorated after fifty-eight days of refusing food on 11 May, rioting had begun to sporadically break out again in some parts of the North. On the same day the depth of tension was illustrated when the largest of the Protestant paramilitary organisations, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), carried out what it described as a mobilisation exercise with 300 unarmed men dressed in paramilitary uniform in Londonderry.³⁰ This was partly as a show of strength and intimidation but also echoed the original purpose of the UDA when it was formed in 1971 which was as a defence organisation protecting Protestant areas from the IRA.³¹

26 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 14 May 1981.

27 TIMES, 8 May 1981.

& David Reed IRELAND THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION, London: Larkin Publications, 1984, 355-356.

28 TIMES, 8 May 1981.

29 OBSERVER, 10 May 1981.

30 IRISH TIMES, 12 May 1981.

31 Martin Dillon & Denis Lehane, POLITICAL MURDER IN NORTHERN IRELAND, London: Penguin, 1973, 51-53.

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On 12 May Francis Hughes died at 5.43pm after a fifty-nine day fast. A PIRA statement described him as "*one of the struggle's bravest soldiers*". In the rioting following his death Protestant schools in Londonderry City were attacked, and a teenage girl from Andersonstown sustained fatal head injuries from a plastic bullet fired by the security forces.³² The rioters' attack upon Protestant targets was a rare example of blatant sectarianism by republicans. This was partly an example of the youths' anger but also showed the frustration of the crowds in not having targets upon which to vent their feelings. This was a further reason for the security forces' heavy presence in republican areas.

On 15 May 1981 Brendan McLaughlin was announced as Hughes' replacement on the hunger strike.³³ On the same day a leader of the UDA, Andy Tyrrie, called upon the government to settle the prison dispute as its effects "*could lead to very, very serious conflict*". Perhaps with some of his own men in prison also on his mind he said, "*There are special courts and special legislation so why can't there be special prisoners*".³⁴ This was also, however, an indication of the fear that was developing in Ulster, that the growing polarisation caused by the fast was increasing the danger of inter-community conflict.

As the health of the hunger strikers Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara deteriorated, the inevitable rioting resulted in a twelve year old girl from Belfast

32 GUARDIAN, 13 May 1981.
& IRISH TIMES 14 May 1981.

33 FINANCIAL TIMES, 15 May 1981.

34 GUARDIAN, 15 May 1981.

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sustaining fatal plastic bullet wounds on 19 May. When both the strikers died within hours of one another on the 21 May after a fast of sixty-one days, another person was killed by a plastic bullet during rioting. This time though it was a middle aged man who died.³⁵

The next development in the crisis came when Brendan McLaughlin decided to abandon his fast after doctors informed him that he had a stomach ulcer which would kill him before the fast did. The Provisional leadership deemed that this was an inappropriate way to die and that he should give up on 27 May. His place was taken two days later by Martin Hurson.³⁶ The republicans had realised that the negative publicity of an ill man dying on hunger strike would have countered any benefits that could be gained by the strike. For their purposes the PIRA/INLA needed to recruit men at the peak of health for the hunger strike. The conveyor-belt of strikers continued on 8 June when another PIRA member Tom McIlwee started to fast.³⁷ On the 15 June they were joined by yet another prisoner, Patrick Quinn.³⁸

This alarmed the Catholic Church, and on 18 June the Irish Bishops Conference backed a compromise solution proposed by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. This would have given the prisoners their demands on clothing, association and work, but not what they craved most, political recognition. And at least briefly the

35 IRISH TIMES, 22 May 1981.
& DAILY TELEGRAPH, 23 May 1981.£

36 TIMES, 28 May 1981.

& IRISH TIMES, 29 May 1981.

37 GUARDIAN, 8 June 1981.

38 TIMES, 15 June 1981.

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Commission was confident enough to say that relations between the Provisionals and the British authorities did seem to be "*mellowing a little*".³⁹ With hindsight this statement seemed to be more an exercise in wishful thinking than fact, though the Commission might also been attempting to kick start a dialogue. However, when Michael Devine, a member of the INLA joined the strike on 23 June he demonstrated that republican efforts to keep the pressure on the British authorities continued.⁴⁰

The next move came from the NIO when Atkins, in a five page document, told the hunger strikers that the fast was holding up possible improvements in the prison regime. He also said, "*The hunger strikes are not of the UK government's making and it is not within our power to bring them to an end.*"⁴¹

This was rejected by the prisoners who described the statement as "*arrogant and callous*". However, in their response they did hint at a possible moderation of the demands for special treatment as they were now prepared to see all prisoners in the North benefiting from their "five demands". This was a change from the demands that were issued at the start of the 1981 strike which had been released on the 5 February, claiming the status of political prisoners.⁴²

This progress, though, finished with the death of Joe McDonnell, who died after a fast of sixty-one days on 8 July.⁴³ On 13 July, the prisoners finally rejected the

39 IRISH TIMES, 18 June 1981 & 20 June 1981.

40 GUARDIAN, 23 June 1981.

41 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 1 July 1981.

42 GUARDIAN, 2 July 1981.

43 IRISH TIMES, 9 July 1981.

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mediation efforts by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. The prisoners claimed the Commission had been used by the British authorities against them and that the compromise it produced was an unacceptable dilution of the "five demands".⁴⁴ It seemed that at this stage after so many deaths they had committed themselves to a path where only a complete victory was possible.

Unfortunately, the British were equally committed for the same reason, and the authorities had the advantage as it was PIRA that was suffering from the deaths and the pressure which it had hoped that the British would suffer from.

On 14 July Martin Hurson died after forty-five days without food and was replaced by Matt Devlin on the day after. This continued the seemingly endless tragedy which the prisoners were forcing upon themselves.⁴⁵ On 15 July, the NIO released a statement from Atkins where he continued to show that the authorities would not submit to the prisoners demands.

*The government deeply regrets that the hunger strikers are continuing and has naturally been considering further what steps it can properly take to persuade those concerned to end their action.*⁴⁶

The next organisation that was to try and find a solution to the dispute was the International Red Cross, which intervened in the hope of saving the lives of the eight surviving hunger strikers on the fast.⁴⁷ The

44 **TIMES**, 13 July 1981.

45 **GUARDIAN**, 14 July 1981 & **IRISH TIMES**, 15 July 1981.

46 Humphrey Atkins *THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT WAS ISSUED BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS', M.P, TODAY, Northern Ireland Information Service, Stormont Castle Belfast, 15 July 1981.*

47 **TIMES**, 16 July 1981.

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British government made it clear when they accepted the Red Cross invitation to visit the Maze, that this visit was on the basis of the statutes which permit the Red Cross to inspect the conditions of normal prisoners other than Prisoners of War. The intervention would not be conducted under the 1949 Geneva Convention but in the context of its humanitarian role.⁴⁸

The Red Cross almost immediately ran into problems because the government refused to participate in face to face negotiations with PSF or PIRA.⁴⁹ Though this may have seemed stubborn, one has to remember that the PIRA is an illegal subversive organisation that was actively killing representatives of the state. Further, the British authorities could not afford to give them any form of legitimacy or recognition in the eyes of the world, probably the principal reason for government policy during the strike.

The next important developments came when on 1 August Kevin Lynch, a member of the INLA, died after a fast of seventy-one days. On the same day Paddy Quinn had his forty-seven day fast ended due to the intervention of his relatives, showing the first cracks in the previously united front between the relatives and the republican movement.⁵⁰ This had been brewing for some time, since Adams had already been asked by Fr Faul to intervene with the prisoners on the relatives behalf. The lack of success created bitterness as the futility of the fast was becoming clear to everybody apart from the prisoners

48 Atkins, (15 July 1981).

49 SUNDAY TIMES, 19 July 1981.

50 GUARDIAN, 1 August 1981.

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themselves. The refusal of the external leadership to order the breaking of the fast had placed each family with a dreadful dilemma, to allow their sons or husbands to die or to have them live in defiance of their own wishes.⁵¹ Then on 2 August, Kieran Doherty, the man who had become the elected TD for Monaghan, died after a seventy-three day fast.⁵²

On 7 August it was revealed that the level of violence that had happened since the fast had started five months previously was horrific. In this time period fifty-one people had died and more than 1000 people had been injured in Ulster.⁵³ Another illustration of the level of street disturbance is the fact that during this period, in the months of May and June of 1981, 17,000 plastic bullet rounds were fired by the security forces.⁵⁴ In all approximately half of all plastic bullets fired to date in Ulster were discharged during 1981.⁵⁵

The prisoners had on 6 August offered a compromise to the government but this had been rejected. On 8 August, Thomas McElwee, a convicted murderer died after sixty-two days fasting. He had become the ninth man to die on the hunger strike.⁵⁶ The PIRA replacement for Doherty, Pat Sheehan, started his hunger strike on 10

51 Beresford, (1987), 345-358.

52 *GUARDIAN*, 3 August 1981.

53 *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 7 August 1981.

54 Troops Out Movement, *WITHOUT CONSENT, BRITAIN'S ABUSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRELAND*, Troops Out Movement, London, 1990, pp 8 - 9.

55 *PACK UP THE TROUBLES, CRITICAL EYE*, London: Exco Television for Channel 4, 24 Oct 1991.

56 *OBSERVER*, 9 August 1981.

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August.⁵⁷ On 9 August, another man was killed during a riot by a plastic bullet.⁵⁸ On 17 August, Jackie McMullan was named as the replacement for McElwee.⁵⁹

On 21 August the intervention of the Catholic Church with the relatives, through the chaplains at the Maze, was beginning to show. Patrick McGeowan's mother decided to intervene and save his life when he fell into a coma after forty-seven days.⁶⁰ On 20 August the INLA prisoner Michael Devine died after sixty days without food.⁶¹

The campaign received a much needed propaganda and morale boost on 21 August when Owen Carron, Bobby Sands' election agent, won the by-election caused by Sands' death, gaining a greater number of votes than Sands. He had fought the election on an Anti-H Block Abstentionist ticket.⁶² On 23 August the Provisionals announced their next hunger striker was to be Bernard Fox.⁶³

In late August there seemed to be some moderation in the position of the British government on the prison dispute when it announced on 25 August that it was willing to grant prisoners the right to wear their own clothing at all times if the strike finished.⁶⁴ On 28 August, the Northern Ireland Minister responsible for the prisons, Michael Alison, met with Owen Carron the recently elected MP. Although the talks proved fruitless, as both sides were not prepared to change their stance,

57 IRISH TIMES, 10 August 1981.

58 GUARDIAN, 10 August 1981.

59 IRISH TIMES, 17 August 1981.

60 GUARDIAN, 21 August 1981.

61 IRISH TIMES, 21 August 1981.

62 IRISH TIMES, 22 August 1981.

63 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 24 August 1981.

64 TIMES, 26 August 1981.

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it did show a liberalisation in the British position in agreeing to talk to a member of PSF (though, Carron met the Minister as an MP not a member of the Party).⁶⁵ The Provisionals demonstrated that their determination continued when Hugh Carville was announced as the latest addition to the fast on 31 August.⁶⁶

However the relatives were no longer as determined as the prisoners and on 4 September Mathew Devlins' mother and brother intervened to save his life on the fifty-second day of his fast.⁶⁷ On 6 September Laurence McKeowan's relatives also intervened after seventy days of fasting. There was another blow to the Provisionals on the same day when the INLA, which was divided about whether it should continue the strike as it had very few members left in the Maze to put on the fast, announced that it was cutting down the frequency with which it was putting its men on the hunger strike. There were also rumours that the remaining INLA man on strike, Liam McCloskey, might come off it.⁶⁸

On 14 September the Cabinet reshuffle by Margaret Thatcher saw a change in the team at Stormont with Humphry Atkins and Michael Alison leaving Belfast and being replaced respectively by James Prior and Lord Gowrie. In spite of this, PIRA members continued to join the fast, and on the same day Gerard Hodgins became the latest hunger striker.⁶⁹ However, the flow of people coming off the strike continued when Bernard Fox, ended

65 GUARDIAN, 29 August 1981.

66 INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, 1 September 1981.

67 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 5 September 1981.

68 GUARDIAN, 7 September 1981.

69 GUARDIAN, 14 September 1981.

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his fast after thirty-two days because of a kidney complaint.⁷⁰ Then on 26 September 1981, the remaining INLA prisoner came off the fast after fifty-five days.⁷¹

On 27 September an assistant chaplain at the Maze, Fr Denis Faul, organised a meeting of the remaining hunger strikers' relatives. For some time Faul, who is a committed nationalist, had argued that the deaths in the prison were pointless. But he decided to do more to end the fast and his position amongst the prisoners gave him a pivotal role in achieving this. He decided that he should visit the relatives at home and persuade them to intervene. In the meeting which was attended by five out of the six families he persuaded them to intervene if their relatives on the fast passed out.⁷² When the families informed the prisoners of this Faul had effectively presented a *fait accompli*. The prisoners now faced the problem that they would not die and that the authorities knew this. Thus the fast was effectively emasculated.

It then only became a matter of time before the announcement of the end of the strike was made and eventually, on 3 October, the prisoners took food 216 days and ten deaths after Bobby Sands first refused food.⁷³ In a statement the PIRA was forthright in who it blamed for the failure of the strike.

We have been robbed of the hunger strike as an effective protest weapon principally because of the successful campaign waged against our distressed

70 GUARDIAN, 25 September 1981.

71 IRISH TIMES, 28 September 1981.

72 GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

73 OBSERVER, 4 October 1981.

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*relatives by the Catholic hierarchy, aided and abetted by the Irish establishment.*⁷⁴

The government wisely chose to give a low key response to the end of the fast. It did however feel that the end of the strike had been a vindication of its policy of giving no concessions to terrorists. A few days after the end of the strike James Prior gave a press conference in Belfast. During the conference a series of reforms were announced that went a long way to improving the conditions in which the prisoners were held. The men at the Maze were to be allowed to wear their own clothing at all times (this was as long as the clothing was not paramilitary dress or resembled the warders uniform). There was an increased amount of association to be allowed within each block, and up to half of the remission lost by protesting prisoners was to be restored.⁷⁵

This was politically an extremely astute move. The reforms, together with the concessions given earlier on in the strike, meant that the government had in effect granted the points that the Provisionals had used to attract human rights supporters. At the same time it ensured that control of the prison, which had been Merlyn Rees's original motivation in abolishing the special category status, had been maintained. Further, the prisoners had not gained the much coveted status as political prisoners, while the government was able to be magnanimous in victory by announcing the concessions, and in not being publicly jubilant about the collapse of the

74 OBSERVER, 4 October 1981.

75 TIMES, 7 October 1981.

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strike. In doing this James Prior, was hoping to help facilitate the healing of the divisions that had been opened up in the Province during the strike.

The wisdom of this policy was seen by the reaction of the leader of the SDLP, John Hume, who described the reforms as a "*positive response*".⁷⁶ The Provisionals were also put into some confusion about how to respond to the reforms. They were not what PIRA wanted but were enough to satisfy a substantial number of people who had been sympathetic to the H-Block/Armagh campaign but not to the armed struggle. The prisoners chose to accept their clothing, thus coming "off the Blanket". They had already ended the "dirty" protest to concentrate attention on the fast earlier on in the strike, leaving the "no-work" protest as the only leftover of the dispute that had existed since 1976. This effectively left republicans with nothing to keep attention on the prisons. When the first Provisional prisoner was released after the end of the strike (John Connolly) he said to the press that the prisoners did not consider that there had been any settlement and that the campaign would continue.⁷⁷ This already was more bluster than political reality and the prisoners had no choice but to negotiate with Lord Gowrie, the replacement for Michael Alison, as prisons Minister at the NIO.

Perhaps inevitably, James Prior's wish to heal the wounds opened during the hunger strike was not shared by the loyalist political parties. The Rev Dr Ian Paisley,

⁷⁶ *TIMES*, 7 October 1981.

⁷⁷ *IRISH TIMES*, 14 October 1981.

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leader of the DUP, was forthright in his condemnation of the reforms. He claimed that this was evidence of the long feared sell out of the Protestant community by the British. He also said, *"It is absolutely disastrous. You will see the IRA soon in military uniforms in the prisons. The extra remission is a terrible business"*.⁷⁸

While James Molyneaux, leader of the larger Official Unionist Party, said that the reforms would mean that *"the IRA would be able to claim victory"*.⁷⁹

With hindsight, this reaction should have been expected by the government, and might have been intended by the Tories as a signal that the unionist veto in Ulster was not total and that Mrs Thatcher was prepared to adopt policies that were dramatically different from theirs. This was ultimately to develop to the Anglo-Irish agreement which recognised that Dublin should have a limited role in the government of the North. Ironically, it was the rise of PSF on the back of the prisons dispute at the expense of the moderate nationalists in the SDLP that was to contribute to the agreement.

7c. LOCAL REACTION TO THE HUNGER STRIKE.

The reaction to the hunger strike in the North amongst the political groups not directly concerned with the prison dispute was an indication of the polarisation of views that occurred at this time. Which made some observers fear that there would a resumption of the inter sectarian strife at the level that was seen in the early 1970's.

78 **TIMES**, 7 October 1981.

79 **TIMES**, 7 October 1981.

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Fionnula O'Connor, writing in the *Irish Times*, noted that the violence was not dramatically worse on the streets than was normally expected at the annual internment commemoration marches but that despite this there was an increased climate of fear in the North. She interpreted the reason for this as being the level of awareness and understanding of the issue in both communities and their separate opinions on the matter (which tended to reflect which side of the sectarian divide a person was on). She also noticed that there was a growing perception of Catholicism equalling republicanism amongst Protestants and that republicans like Bernadette Devlin began to refer in speeches to "*our people*" and the "*nationalist people*", forgetting the old republican aim of uniting Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, which had originally been mooted by the Protestant Wolfe Tone who is revered as the founder of Irish republicanism.⁸⁰ The role of the SDLP in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election had also blurred the distinction in the minds of many unionists between it and PSF. By refusing to stand and thus divide the anti-unionist vote the SDLP had alienated many Protestants who perceived this to be supporting the prison campaign.⁸¹ Further, the unionists perceived the votes in the by-elections and in the Irish Republic's general election, where H-Block candidates were voted in to seats, as pro-PIRA votes. An example of this was a speech by the

80 *IRISH TIMES*, 6 May 1981.

81 Michael J. Cunningham, *BRITISH GOVERNMENT POLICY IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1969 - 1989, ITS NATURE AND EXECUTION*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991, p 146.

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Official Unionist MP for Londonderry W.M. Ross after the two republican prisoners were elected to the Dail in June 1981, when he said, "*These two men, like Sands, were elected by people who believe in the gunman's path to a United Ireland.*"⁸² This led to the perception of all nationalists being looked on as closet if not open supporters of physical force republicanism, and harked back to the attitudes of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

One further factor, in this polarisation, was the basic fear of attack that existed in both communities. While members of each community tended to genuinely support their own side (whether unionist or nationalist), this would not have dramatically changed the existing community relations which were not internationally known for their harmony! The paramilitaries encouraged this fear especially in the republican areas where the Provisionals chose to distribute leaflets explaining that Protestants would probably attack, and by organising food hoarding and vigilante patrols.⁸³ This suited their aims as it both encouraged recruitment (the fear of attack gave the PIRA a legitimacy which it did not otherwise have) and allowed for increased pressure on the security forces, which indirectly would pressurise the government to concede on the prisons issue.

An aspect which the polarisation also had which suited extremists in both communities was the squeezing

82 *SPEECH BY W. M. ROSS M.P AT THE UNFURLING OF A NEW BANNER AT BREADY LOYAL ORANGE LODGE.* News Release, Ulster Unionist Party, 23 June 1981.

83 *SUNDAY TIMES*, 3 May 1981.

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and marginalisation of the rather small middle ground politicians like the Alliance Party and the independent socialist Gerry Fitt. Evidence of this was seen in the May local government elections and the two Westminster by-elections in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.⁸⁴ The difficulty when assessing the situation is analysing whether the polarisation was a result of the tension or vice versa. In the writer's view the polarisation was caused directly by the radically different perceptions of the conflict and this difference led directly to the retreat to sectarianism in the Province. The *Guardian* reported that tension in Protestant areas, such as the enclave of the Fountain on the largely Catholic city side of Londonderry, was described as very high, though this was caused more by fear rather than hostility. The view of one Protestant resident seemed to be generally representative when he said *I think it is a pity that he [Bobby Sands] is throwing away his life for nothing*".⁸⁵ This supposition would be reflected in the UDA Supreme Commander Andy Tyrie's call on the government to settle the dispute in May 1981.⁸⁶ This statement must be interpreted in the context of the role that the Protestant paramilitaries were playing during the prison crisis.

When special category status was in operation the loyalist terrorists made use of the privileges that it

84 Arthur Aughey & Colin McIlhey, *THE ULSTER DEFENCE ASSOCIATION, PARAMILITARIES AND POLITICS, CONFLICT QUARTERLY*, Frederiction, New Brunswick (Canada): Centre For Conflict Studies University Of New Brunswick, Fall 1981, 32.

85 *GUARDIAN*, 2 May 1981.

86 *GUARDIAN*, 15 May 1981.

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gave to them. Once this was abolished some of the first protests came from Protestants, and the loyalists had gone on the "blanket" protest themselves for brief periods as well as going briefly on hunger strike during 1980 in protest at prison conditions and the religious integration of prisoners.⁸⁷ It is likely that the loyalist paramilitaries would have wanted to support the protest, but the hostility of the Protestant politicians and public to special status restricted their activities.⁸⁸ Despite this the loyalists had also assassinated leading H-Block activists as part of a concerted attack against the external prison campaign. However, this was probably because the activists in the National H-Block/Armagh Committee were the major profile advocates of physical force nationalism and therefore the easiest targets. So the loyalist paramilitaries had something to gain from a republican victory yet could not afford to be seen as too sympathetic and out of step with the loyalist community.⁸⁹ The situation did lead to the calling of an emergency meeting of Protestant paramilitaries by the Ulster Army Council because of the fear of a PIRA/INLA offensive if Sands died. The meeting was attended by representatives of the UVF (Ulster

87 Patrick Bishop & Eamonn Mallie, **THE PROVISIONAL IRA**. London: Corgi, 1989, 343-344.

88 Tim Pat Coogan, **ON THE BLANKET, THE H-BLOCK STORY**. Swords, Co.Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 182-183.

89 There must also have been some tension within the UDA leadership as well at this time, the use of political targeting was rare for loyalists who preferred to kill Catholic civilians in an attempt to terrorise the whole community. Evidence would suggest that this change was under the influence of John McMichael, a Brigadier in the UDA/UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters). Martin Dillon, **THE DIRTY WAR**, London: Arrow, 1990, 292.

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Volunteer Force), the Red Hand Commandos and the Orange Volunteers. A spokesman for the Army Council, Samuel Doddy, was at pains to explain that this move was defensive. *"There is absolutely no intention of attacking any Catholic ghetto areas. Our concern is to ensure that our own areas and our people are safe."*⁹⁰

The constitutional unionists largely underestimated the importance of the hunger strike. This was because of their obsession with each other and their perpetual fear that the British might abandon them. The loyalist political parties in the early 1970's were subjected to many schisms over the general problem of political reform. The various groups had eventually merged into two principal parties: the relatively moderate Ulster Unionist Party (the Official Unionists) and the more extreme Democratic Unionist Party. They were by the early 1980's locked in a competition as to which party was to be the premier unionist party.

An example of the ferocity with which this competition was being fought can be seen in the press releases of the time by the Official Unionists which regularly attacked Ian Paisley the DUP leader but hardly mentioned the prison dispute. In one speech the elder statesman of the Official Unionists, Enoch Powell, attacked Paisley for his antics while on the *"Lundy trail"*.⁹¹ This was a reference to his attempted

⁹⁰ *TIMES*, 27 April 1981.

⁹¹ The use of the word Lundy was an especially abusive reference to any unionist as Lundy was the Protestant traitor who wanted to surrender the garrison in Derry to the Catholic King James II in 1689. J. Enoch Powell, *SPEECH BY J. ENOCH POWELL*, News Release, Ulster Unionist Party, Glengall St, Belfast, 15 May 1981.

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resurrection of the famous Carson trail against the Dublin summit. He went on to say,

I must grudgingly admit that it would be beyond the capacity of the IRA to be any where near so effective in calling the Union into question, antagonising Britain and playing Haughey's game.⁹²

Aside from this power struggle their other principal fear was the series of talks between Margaret Thatcher and the Irish Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. There were the inevitable fears that as long as the British were prepared to talk to the Republic about the North, despite the claim for the North's territory in the Republic's constitution, that the British would one day abandon them. Finally, they felt that there was too much media attention on the fast and they did not want to add to it. As early as 3 March 1981, James Kilfedder, the MP for North Down asked Atkins.

Can the right hon gentleman or the government do something about certain sections of the news media that are bombarding the public with propaganda issued by the IRA, which, no doubt, will increase as the hunger strike goes on until, perhaps the man's [Sands] death, which may lead to further violence?⁹³

The unionist politicians when they did address the prison problem were fairly forthright in their attitude; they felt that the British policy was correct and that the republican (and loyalist) prisoners were terrorists and so should be treated as criminal prisoners and not be given anything that might give them even a shred of legitimacy. When they were asked to respond to the deaths of the hunger strikers they gave a similar reaction whatever party they belonged too. The Official Unionist

92 Ibid.

93 HANSARD, 3 March 1981, colls 131-134.

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MP, Harold McCusker, when reacting to Sands' death warned that those who had borne the brunt of PIRA violence should be alert and vigilant in case of any reprisals as *"they will be given no choice by those whose calling card is a bullet in the back"*.⁹⁴

Similarly Ian Paisley the leader of the DUP said Sands had a choice not afforded to PIRA victims.⁹⁵ It was the same when the hunger strike finally ended and both parties roundly condemned the British prison reforms, which were seen to have gone too far, and turned a defeat into a victory for the republican movement.⁹⁶

The perception of the liberal, largely middle class anti-sectarian Alliance Party was also hostile to the granting of concessions to the prisoners. In the local elections of May 1981, their manifesto roundly condemned what it saw as the hypocrisy and complicity of the H-Block campaigners in the death of Bobby Sands.

*He was callously encouraged to go to his death because the Provisionals and their fellow travellers believed that the death of an MP on hunger strike would be an immense international propaganda weapon which they could exploit to the full. They had already decided that Bobby Sands was of more value dead, rather than alive.*⁹⁷

Of all the constitutional parties the SDLP found itself in the most difficult position. Unlike the other parties it had to fight with PSF for the same vote and so was the most susceptible to the pressure which the National H-Block/Armagh Committee could exert. It has as its aim the peaceful reuniting of Ireland and is

94 *GUARDIAN*, 6 May 1981.

95 *GUARDIAN*, 6 May 1981.

96 *TIMES*, 7 October 1981.

97 *COUNCIL ELECTION MANIFESTO, "ALLIANCE, THE NEWSPAPER OF THE ALLIANCE PARTY OF NORTHERN IRELAND"*, May 1981.

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fundamentally opposed to the use of violence for this purpose. In this sense it has to prove to the nationalist community that there is another way to address the grievances and interests of the Catholics in the North other than by the gun. In October 1980 during the first hunger strike the leader of the SDLP, John Hume, released a statement on the parties attitude to prison policy.

The SDLP has taken the consistent view that the only punishment to which a prisoner should be subjected is the deprivation of liberty. All other punishments are in danger of infringing basic humanitarian conditions in prison.⁹⁸

The Party made a desperate effort to be all things to all men, in that it condemned violence and thus could not object to the imprisonment of PIRA members who had been convicted of criminal acts, but had also to address the fact that its constituency wanted to see the H-Block issue resolved. As early as February 1979 the SDLP released a statement which argued,

We are convinced that it is within the government's power to take measures which would resolve the problem without any sacrifice of principles.⁹⁹

Later on, once the dispute was fast heading to a dramatic conclusion, this factor continued to be shown. One example of this was an emergency motion put to the party conference which both attacked the government for its inflexibility and made a call on the prisoners to end the hunger strike, while at the same time also making a general call for the sectarian divisions not to be further encouraged by politicians and other commentators.

98 John Hume, *STATEMENT BY MR JOHN HUME*, Press Release, SDLP, 38 University St, Belfast, 30 October 1980.

99 SDLP, *BRITISH TACTICS CONTRIBUTING TO VIOLENCE*, Press Release, SDLP, 38 University St, Belfast, February 1979.

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Conference deplores the ineptitude of the British governments handling of the H-Block issue, urges that the prisoners be allowed to wear their own clothing in line with progressive practice in other countries... calls for immediate action to implement a new regime based on respect for individual dignity, appeals to the hunger strikers to allow the matter to be settled through further discussions, reminds all who publicly comment on the issue of its potential for deepening community divisions and calls on them to direct their efforts towards a peaceful resolution of the issue. Executive Committee.¹⁰⁰

The Party also faced an important ethical and practical problem after the death of Frank Maguire the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. This was a constituency with a narrow Catholic majority that had been held by Maguire as an Independent Nationalist. While Maguire had been alive the various nationalist parties had been content not to stand thus allowing the vote not to be split. But in the by-election the National H-Block/Armagh Committee decided to put Bobby Sands up for election.

This placed the SDLP in a rather difficult position. It could not afford to be blamed for the death of any prisoners. It knew that the H-Block campaigners would almost certainly claim during campaigning that a vote for Sands would save his life as the government would not permit the death of an MP. If an SDLP candidate split the vote and allowed the Unionist candidate Harry West to win, or the SDLP won the seat it would be open to the accusation that by entering the contest they caused the death of Sands. If they entered the contest and lost to Sands an even worse possibility was opened up. That was that PSF could claim to be the premier nationalist party

100 SDLP, *EMERGENCY MOTION- NUMBER 1*, Press Release, SDLP, 38 University St, Belfast, undated (probably 1981).

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and so claim that the SDLP had become an irrelevance to most working class Catholics. So it found itself with the prospect of losing whether it won or lost the election.

Initially, the SDLP meeting in Irvinstown on 21 March, was favourable to the prospect of contesting the by-election. However, members of the Fermanagh party persuaded the executive to back Frank Maguire's brother Noel as the nationalist candidate rather than split the vote, but Austin Currie, a local leader and former civil rights activist who was passionately opposed to political violence and terrorism, was determined that he would stand against Sands as an independent if Maguire withdrew. Two days before the closing date for the deadline for candidates in the by-election to be proposed, Maguire informed the SDLP that he would stand. Then thirteen minutes before the closure of the nominations Maguire withdrew his papers leaving Sands as the sole anti-unionist candidate. The SDLP was furious but powerless to do anything other than call on its supporters to abstain from the vote. It seems that Maguire was pressurised into withdrawing his papers by PSF. There were subsequent allegations that he had been physically threatened but he did subsequently call on his supporters to vote for Sands.¹⁰¹ After Sands died and a new by-election was called the SDLP chose not to propose any candidates for the seat though Currie opposed this and chose to stand as an Independent Nationalist.¹⁰² The SDLP would have been unwilling to risk a probable defeat

101 Clarke, (1987), 141-142, & Chris Ryder, *THE RUC, A FORCE UNDER FIRE*. London: Mandarin, 1989, 248-50.

102 Clarke, (1987), 191.

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by Owen Carron after the bitterness which many of the voters had felt after Sands death and did not wish to be portrayed as too pro-British at this stage. Given that Austin Currie and the Alliance candidate were roundly beaten, and that Carron increased Sands share of the vote, the SDLP probably made the right decision. Subsequently, in the General Elections that have followed the Party has chosen to stand and split the vote allowing the moderate Official Unionist Ken Maginnis to become the MP for this area.

The general perception of the SDLP towards the prison dispute was that the government could and should have resolved it before it snowballed into the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. It viewed the pro-prisoner campaign with a good deal of suspicion as it marked the rise of PSF as an electoral force and so a direct rival for the nationalist vote. When the dispute finally finished in October 1981, the SDLP were extremely relieved. As the representative of the nationalist establishment in the North the party had been involved in several mediation attempts, especially that of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. The Commission's recommended solution had been approximately the SDLP's and so when the British announced that their would be a series of reforms now the hunger strike was over which were essentially the compromise proposed by the Commission welcoming this John Hume released a statement describing the reforms as a "*positive response*".¹⁰³

103 **TIMES**, 7 October 1981.

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Thus, the various parties in the Province tended to react to the hunger strike and the prison dispute in a fairly predictable manner. This reflected the views of their supporters who tend to vote on "tribal" as opposed to moral or ideological grounds (with the exception of the Alliance Party). The result of this was the growth of tension between the two communities. As sectarian tension tended to be generated by republicans in this specific situation, once the majority of Catholics felt that the prisoners had been treated fairly by the government's reforms of 6 October, tension dramatically reduced in the Province. At the same stage PSF found that its campaign had run out of steam and they have been subsequently unable to gain the high levels of support that they commanded in 1981, whether on prison conditions or the wider question of the whole conflict. Many of the other criminal justice policies which had led to conflict and controversy during the 1970's had been resolved. For example, the psychological interrogation techniques that had brought allegations of torture had been abandoned, and internment without trial was discontinued. The liberal regime which the government introduced in the Maze and other prisons in the North during the 1980's has also meant that the Provisionals have been unable to find a new single issue that could exert so much feeling in the nationalist community. There remain complaints, especially about the integration of Protestant and Catholic paramilitaries in the Crumlin Road Gaol, and the holding of PIRA members in mainland prisons for their roles in bombing campaigns in Britain, but when there

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have been hunger strikes subsequently, they have failed to catch the attention of anyone but diehard republicans.¹⁰⁴

The reactions of the civil population in the North generally reflected the views of their political leaderships. The Catholic community tended to look on the claim of the prisoners for political status as a recognition of the obvious. On the other hand the Protestants viewed the prisoners as criminals living in self-inflicted conditions. Both sides felt threatened by the rise in tension that the fast brought and which led to the retreat back to the siege mentality of the early 1970's.

At the time there were a great many fears that the hunger strike might have led to a long term change in the situation in the Province. The issue of the British presence in the North was again questioned internationally. Meanwhile in Ulster PSF was now in a position to challenge the SDLP as the representative of Northern nationalists. These issues are examined in the next chapter, which will look at the longer term implications of the 1981 prison hunger strike.

104 Martina Anderson, *IN DURHAMS H- WING*, & Danny Morrison, *CRUMLIN ROAD GAOL- THE SEGREGATION BATTLE CONTINUES, THE CAPTIVE VOICE/AN GLOR GAFA*, Belfast: PSF-POW Dept, Summer 1990, 5 & 16-17.

CHAPTER VIII
THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1981
HUNGER STRIKE

8a. INTRODUCTION.

Among the many factors which were to still to be assessed at the end of the hunger strike, the question of to what extent the political scenery of Northern Ireland had been changed was imperative? Did the international attention attracted mean that pressure might grow against the maintenance of the Union? What had been the effect of the fast upon the Provinces electorate? Was there to be a further polarisation of the vote in both communities as there had during the fast or would the *status quo* return? Specifically, what was the effect of the fast upon the nationalist community and would one see the rise of PSF as the party of the nationalists in the North?

Section 8b, will deal with the Irish Republic's reaction and the international repercussions to the strike, while section 8c will examine the long term effect of the strike on the Northern Irish situation ten years on from its end and concentrating on the effect of the fast upon PSF and the British Government.

8b. THE INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS OF THE HUNGER STRIKE.

Northern Ireland first gained the attention of the world in the late 1960's and early 1970's when civil rights marchers was brutally attacked by the police, B-Specials, and Protestant extremists. This was followed by the violence in which the Provisionals were born, and troops were sent in to the Province initially to protect

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Catholic areas, but subsequently to fight the various factions of the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries. However, as is generally the case, over time the violence became a regular feature and the world's media transferred their attention to other wars, such as the one being lost by the US in South East Asia. Northern Ireland became relegated to the inside pages of newspapers and was of only marginal interest to editors. But the hunger strikes and the violence associated with them made Ireland newsworthy again. Interestingly the attention given to the prisoners was far greater than that of the eighteen prison officers murdered by republicans during the prison dispute.

This attention came from all over the world. Within many of the UK's allies, such as the US and Australia, groups of republican sympathisers had found an issue which they could use to paint Britain in the worst possible light, and by extension question the continuation of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

This point was well illustrated in a letter that was smuggled out of the prison from Tom McKerney, an inmate of H-5 who wrote to Amnesty International requesting their involvement. In the letter he summarised the reasons for the "blanket" protest and used the argument that because the motives of the prisoners were political they should be classed as political prisoners.

There is virtually no argument whatsoever against the fact that three facets of British malpractice are responsible for the blanket protest: 1. The British occupation of Ireland, 2. State

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*authorised torture and, 3. repressive and draconian laws.*¹

This attempt failed as Amnesty International is concerned with non-violent prisoners of conscience and the republican prisoners had undeniably been involved in violence, whatever their motives. The letter did show that the intention of the protest was to concentrate on the issue as one of human rights rather than of who controlled the prison, which was the Government's interpretation of the dispute. The hope was that by portraying the British presence in Ireland as a draconian neo-dictatorship the Provisionals could be portrayed as freedom fighters with right on their side. So the international campaign had as a definite agenda the aim of discrediting the British argument that the majority should be allowed to decide what country they wished to be part of, as the Protestants were in the majority they had the right to stay in the Union. Interestingly the pro-republican, 68 Committee, an annual civil rights commemoration organisation in Londonderry also put this point across with the slogan "*There Can Be No Civil Rights Without National Rights*".² The national rights that are referred to here are those of the Irish nationalists rather than those of the community who class themselves as British.

The protest was also sufficient to promote the aims of the Provisionals in various EEC countries which had not had a great interest in Ireland before. This created

1 Letter from Tom McKerney (H-5) to Amnesty International, London. Undated pre October 1980 original in the political collection Linen Hall Library Belfast.

2 Fergus O'Hare, *COMMON MEMORIES, CONTRASTING OPINIONS, FORTNIGHT*, October 1988.

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problems for Britain in its international policy, but the most important reaction by an outside power was that of the Irish Republic, which will be dealt with first.

The constitution of the Irish Republic makes a claim for the territory of the Six Counties of the North. This together with the history of the origins of modern Ireland, gives the Republic an importance and interest in Northern affairs which was officially acknowledged in the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985. The troubles are also of great importance to the stability of the Republic, and its importance in Ulsters affairs means that it has a role in the domestic politics of the North that is far greater than one would normally expect from a neighbouring country.

In 1977, the Irish Government gave what was effectively political status to the republican prisoners in Portlaoise Prison after a hunger strike had been started. This was regarded by the Irish Government as an acceptable prison regime and meant that it felt that the British were showing too much inflexibility to the Maze prisoners in not permitting similar changes.³ The Irish Government was also afraid of the effect that the dispute in the North might have in the Republic and within Fianna Fail (FF) as a party. In November 1980 internal party pressure was already being exerted when some of Haughey's more republican minded backbenchers were receiving appeals directly from the H-Blocks. For instance the TD, Sile de Valera, received a letter from a "blanketman" in

³ Tim Pat Coogan, *THE IRA*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988, 618-619.

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H-3, Colm Scullion, who explained to her the reasons for embarking upon the hunger strike were that.

The English showed all signs of remaining static, refusing to move in the slightest to end this protest and only willingness to continue this inhumanity indefinitely affected our decision.⁴

It was probably hoped that this pressure directly upon his own backbenchers might persuade Haughey to lend his weight to the prisoners' demands. The FF government under Haughey was frightened that its position in power was threatened by the possible defection of voters from FF to PSF. Haughey, had originally hoped to delay the Irish general election until after the hunger strike had been resolved. But he eventually decided that the issue would continue and that he should go to the country before opinion was further inflamed over the issue. This made FF choose, after the decision to go to the country in June 1981, to highlight the prisons in order to persuade its more republican supporters to stay loyal rather than vote for one of the prison candidates. The FF manifesto led with its Northern policy, saying about the prisons dispute that *"The government has urged the adoption of a humanitarian approach to the problem of the prisons in the North."*⁵

However this was not enough to persuade the voters of Monaghan/Cavan and Louth, and as a result Haughey found that these two seats were to cost him power and give victory to a Fine Gael(FG)/Labour Coalition. Because

4 Unpublished letter to Sile de Valera from Colm Scullion (H-3), dated 24 Nov 1980, original in the Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

5 Fianna Fail SUMMARY OF OUR PROGRAM FOR THE 80'S, Dublin: 1981, 1.

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of this, after the election but before the new government had taken over, Haughey chose to launch a new initiative over the H-Blocks.⁶ In the Republic there was a definite cross-party agreement that the prisons dispute should be resolved. The leader of FG, Dr Garret FitzGerald was more understanding of the position that the British had taken but felt that the dispute could be and should be solved. With his own close personal links to the North he was disturbed by the violence that the crisis was causing and was alarmed by the spill over of this into the Republic, especially to Dublin which had not previously had a strong reputation for militant republicanism. He had personally met with relatives of the hunger strikers and was inclined to look at them from a humanitarian view as he did the whole dispute.⁷ He, like Haughey, backed the attempted mediation of first the European Commission for Human Rights, and subsequently the intervention by the Church based Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, in the hope that through these neutral intermediaries a possible compromise might be reached. It was not until the Irish Commission made a compromise proposal which was rejected by the prisoners that he realised that the dispute had become an all or nothing struggle between the "blanketmen" and the government. This meant that the moderate reforms which would have allowed the government to retain control but give the prisoners privileges like the wearing of their own clothing were not acceptable to the Provisionals.

6 DAILY TELEGRAPH, 25 June 1981.

7 Raymond Smith, **GARRET, THE ENIGMA, DR GARRET FITZGERALD**, Dublin: Aherlow publishers, 1985, 406 - 408.

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It was from outside of the British isles, though, that the most worrying reactions came as far as the British government was concerned. Countries not noted for pro-British feeling were inevitably critical. The spectacle of criticism from the Eastern Block or the Afrikaner community in South Africa could be easily dismissed when one compared the human rights violations of these countries to Northern Ireland.⁸ It was not so easy to dismiss the criticism that came from countries which generally were sympathetic to Britain. This was the case within the EEC, NATO, and the Commonwealth. The Provisionals had chosen to portray their campaign in Europe using a left of centre anti-imperialist argument. This led to an emphasis upon British intransigence leading to bad conditions within the cells and the hunger strikers deaths.⁹

Within Europe the strongest criticism came from France where a group had been formed in 1980 to support the claims of the prisoners. This was the *Comite de Defense des Prisonniers Politiques Irlandail*. It organised marches of sympathisers and organised a petition of 12,000 signatures in support of the demand for political status.¹⁰ The campaign which was dominated by the Communist Party and their affiliated trade unions had organised a stepping up of activity in May as Sands

8 Adrian Guelke, *DESPERATION IN PRETORIA*, FORTNIGHT, June 1989.

9 Kieth Bryett and Joanne Wright, *PROPAGANDA AND JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND, TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE*, London: Frank Cass, Summer 1991, 31-34.

10 leaflet issued by the *Comite de Defense des Prisonniers Politiques Irlandail*, 14 rue de Nantevil 75015 Paris, Undated 1981.

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approached death. The Paris office of British Airways was occupied on 2 May by protesters claiming that Thatcher was an assassin and accusing the President, Valery Giscard d'Estaing, of being her accomplice.¹¹ On 6 May protesters demonstrated against the British Ambassador about the death of Sands. This was all in the context of the French Presidential election so it was not as successful in gaining as many headlines as the protesters might have wished and failed to become an issue.¹² Predictably even Sands' death was overshadowed by domestic politics, this was to mean that in the long term pro-republican activity did not change French policy.

In Scandinavia, an area with very strong links with the UK and a residual pro-British sentiment dating from the Second World War along with a general ignorance of Northern Ireland, the issue was useful to republican sympathisers. One example for instance was in the formation of an Irish committee in Denmark with regional groups who released leaflets to the help put the PIRA case to the Danish population. One example of this was a leaflet by Bjarne Mortensen, for the *Irlandskomiteen i Odense* entitled *Irsk Parlamentsmedlem Kieran Doherty Er Dod Af Sultestrejke - Som Frihedskæmper*, ("IRISH MP KIERAN DOHERTY IS DEAD FROM A HUNGER STRIKE - AS A FREEDOM FIGHTER"). It shows well how the H-Block issue was used to give the republican interpretation of Irish history.

11 LE MONDE, 3 May 1981.

12 LE MONDE, 7 May 1981.

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The imprisoned prisoners of war in the H-blocks, Long Kesh in Northern Ireland are freedom fighters in a war that is centuries old. In our century it started with the war of independence 1919 - 1921, in which the British troops were driven to the northern part of Ireland. It last flared up in 1969, when British paratroopers re-occupied Northern Ireland. The Irish population and The Irish Republican Army are fighting for a United Ireland. A fight for Independence and social justice.

(De fængslede krigsfanger i H-Blok, Long Kesh i NordIrland er friheds Kæmpere i en Krig. Der er Arhundred Gammel. I vort Arhundred startede det med uafhængighedskrigen 1919-21. Hvor de Britiske tropper blev fordrevet til det Nordlige Irland. Sidst Blussede det op i 1969, da Britiske faldskaermstropper genbesatte NordIrland. Den Irske Befolkning og den Irske Republikanske Haer kæmper for et Forenet Irland. En kamp for selvstaendighed og social retfaerdighed).¹³

This rather naive, one-sided, and in parts factually incorrect version of modern Irish history was able to gain an audience for the hunger strikers as well as place the British firmly in the role of aggressor. The leaflet went on to explain that the troubles were nothing to do with terrorism and that Kieran Doherty was not a terrorist as he was an elected member of the Dail. It went on to explain that.

Only the violent protest of the Irish people and world opinion can make the British give in. (Kun det irske folk og verdensopinionens kraftige protest kan fa briterne til at give after).¹⁴

This demand for support for the aims of the Provisionals was based largely upon the newly-claimed legitimacy that the H-Block Armagh Committee had gained in the by-elections in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and in the general election in the Republic. For the first time in recent history, that republicans had been able to receive

13 Bjarne Mortensen, *IRSK PARLAMENTSMEDELEM KIERAN DOHERTY ER DOD AF SULTESTREJKE - SOM FRIHEDSKAEMPERE, Irlandskomiteen i Odense, Smedevaenget 10 523, Odense (Denmark), 1981.*

14 Ibid.

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sufficient support to win seats and this opportunity was not going to be wasted.

In the international campaign the existence of the SDLP as the principal representative nationalists north of the Irish border was conveniently forgotten and the uninformed reader could be forgiven for thinking that PSF were the only representatives of Catholics in Northern Ireland. Similarly the existence of the Protestant majority in the North was also not mentioned. These were ignored probably because the foreign writers were sometimes genuinely ignorant about the issues in Ulster and simply believed what the republicans said to them. This was certainly the case with at least one foreign journalist in Ireland who covered the death of Sands and the rioting which followed. The *New York Daily News*, a paper with a large Irish American readership, sent a reporter, Michael Daly, to cover events in Ulster. He chose to stay in the hard-line republican area of Andersonstown in Belfast rather than with the rest of the press who used the large hotels in the centre of town. In his reports he made many mistakes that were easy to detect, as he simply reported what the Provisionals told him. These inaccuracies were soon detected by British journalists in the US who published stories back in the UK about this, and forced his rather humiliating recall by the paper.¹⁵ This showed that the Provisionals were quite happy to twist the truth if it suited them. If they were prepared to allow a sympathetic journalist to discredit himself, it is little wonder that they felt

15 SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, 10 MAY 1981.

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happy to feed misinformation to supporters world wide, who generally do not have the wish to study Ireland in any great depth.

Similarly, in Australia there was a growth of activity organised by a mix of human rights activists and republican sympathisers. In Sydney the most effective publicity was organised by a local man of Irish extraction, Eamon O'Connor, who decided to mount a hunger strike of his own in August 1981 to gain local attention to the dispute. He explained his view on the origins of the dispute in a leaflet.

The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, then decided that all Irish people 'lifted', tortured and 'tried' by her conveyor belt system, after May 1976, would be subject to criminalisation. The republican prisoners true to republican tradition, refused.¹⁶

Again, in this literature we see historical inaccuracy in that the leaflet seems to claim that it was Margaret Thatcher who introduced the abandonment of special status when in reality, she was still three years from winning power in 1976. This was probably ignorance, but by August 1981 Thatcher was such a hate figure in republican demonology that it is entirely possible that they just chose her as the embodiment of all recent British policy in Ireland. In the leaflet there was also a call for letters of protest at the lack of political status to be sent to, Malcolm Fraser (Australia's Federal PM), Thatcher, and local politicians, as well as a request to phone television and radio stations in support of the prisoners. The hunger strike by O'Connor did

16 SYDNEY HUNGER STRIKER EAMON O'CONNOR, Sydney (Australia): Sydney H-Block Committee Box k703, 1981.

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succeed in gaining the attention of some opposition Labour MP's who under the banner of the Geneva Rights For H-Block Committee of Australia, requested that he end his fast and put forward a motion to the Australian parliament that called *"upon the government of Great Britain to grant the five demands of the Irish republican prisoners."*¹⁷ In Australia though, the right were still in power and so relations with the UK were held to be of greater importance than the concerns of opposition MP's. Further, it is unlikely that many Australians outside of Sydney would have been greatly concerned with events in Ireland.

The country that probably worried the British government most though was the United States. The Irish in America have a long history of support for militant republicanism. In the nineteenth century there was even an attempt by expatriate Fenians under the name of the IRA to invade Canada from US territory. More recently the Provisionals had started to raise finance from the Irish-American population. The front organisation that was used the most was Noraid (Irish Northern Aid). This organisation was used largely in a fund raising capacity, normally for the relatives of republican prisoners but allegedly also for arms. It had a secondary role, which was that of a propaganda organisation taking speakers to America for speech tours.¹⁸ They organised pickets of notable British targets like the luxury liner Queen Elizabeth II, and visits by members of the British

17 GENEVA RIGHTS FOR H-BLOCK COMMITTEE OF AUSTRALIA, 1981
18 Patrick Bishop & Eamonn Mallie, THE PROVISIONAL IRA.
London: Corgi, 1989, 297.

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government and the royal family.¹⁹ It has also been claimed by Tim Pat Coogan that the hunger strike served to re-ignite interest and awareness of the North amongst a large section of the Irish American community and led to hostility in the Congress to British government policy up to and including the reforms of the extradition act with the UK in 1986.²⁰ As with many attempts to use hindsight as an explanation for later actions, this is open to some debate. It is true though, that the 1980's were marked by the involvement of many American legislators in introducing the MacBride principles into State legislatures. These introduced quotas for fair employment if American firms wished to invest in the Province. The British argued that this was disinvestment by the back door and accused campaigners of being pro-Provisional.

However, in the US other groups and individuals were supporting the prisoners protest. In one example a former US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, and, Fr Daniel Berrigan, went to Northern Ireland during the hunger strike and sought to enter the Maze but were barred by the authorities.²¹ This decision, given the nature of the visitors, was almost certainly taken at ministerial level. It is probable that the decision to do this was to signal that an initiative that would almost certainly have favoured the prisoners was not welcome. The

19 ABC NIGHTLINE, New York(US), 4-9 May 1981, & CBS EVENING NEWS, New York, 5 & 9 May 1981.

20 Coogan, (1988), 630.

21 Liam Clarke, **BROADENING THE BATTLEFIELD, THE H-BLOCKS AND THE RISE OF SINN FEIN**, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 148.

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authorities would also have been aware that the prospect of a senior legal figure from the US condemning the conditions in the prison was a worse prospect than simply an angry former US Attorney General not getting his own way.

Of greater import than the Irish American fringe which though vocal was not very influential, were the more mainstream groups led by the Democratic Party establishment. On 6 May the four leading Irish American politicians, collectively known as the four horsemen (Senators Edward Kennedy and Daniel Moynihan, Speaker Tip O'Neill and Governor Hugh Carey of New York) wrote a letter to Margaret Thatcher, condemning violence in Ulster but also questioning a British "*posture of inflexibility*". This prompted a reply from Thatcher on 14 May. In this letter she refuted the allegations stating that the British government had acted with "*great flexibility*". She then outlined British attempts to negotiate on prison conditions but stated that the impasse in resolving the dispute was over political status not conditions, which the prisoners demanded and the British could never concede.²² This form of legitimisation and recognition could not be given.

The four horsemen had practically dictated the Carter Administrations Northern Irish Policy, and tended to take their cue from John Hume and the SDLP.²³ But by

22 Margaret Thatcher, *TEXT OF THE RELY BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MRS THATCHER, TO A MESSAGE OF MAY 6 FROM US SENATORS KENNEDY AND MOYNIHAN, SPEAKER T.P. O'NEILL AND GOVERNOR CAREY OF NEW YORK*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Information Service, 14 May 1981.

23 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 299-300.

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1981 the US Republican Party had regained the Presidency with Ronald Reagan, a man who was both ideologically and personally close to Margaret Thatcher. This meant that he was unwilling to strain the relationship he had with her and chose not to follow their advice, while not making them unduly hostile by repealing the previous administration's ban on arms sales to the RUC, thus preserving the *status quo*. Another prominent Irish-American William V. Shannon, the US Ambassador to Dublin from 1977 to 1981 described the hunger strike in 1986 as "*the greatest political and propaganda coup for the IRA in the last decade.*"²⁴

Between the end of July and early August the new regime in Dublin led by Garret FitzGerald was frustrated by the stalemate in the North and decided to try to pressurise the British through the Americans.²⁵ The Irish Ambassador to Washington, Sean Donlon, approached the President in order to gain some US involvement, but Reagan refused to get involved in the "*tragic situation*".²⁶ This approach had been prompted by desperation in Dublin, but the President was realistic enough to know that Thatcher would regard this as unwanted interference in the internal affairs of the UK. To get embroiled in a situation which one could not solve and which would put unnecessary strain on a relationship with a close political and ideological ally would have

& Kevin J. Kelley, *THE LONGEST WAR, NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRA*, London: Zed Books, 1988, 277-280.

24 William V. Shannon, *THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT, FOREIGN AFFAIRS*, Council on Foreign Relations Inc, New York, vol 64 no 4, Spring 1986, 856.

25 Kelley, (1988), 343.

26 Ibid, 343.

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been foolish in the extreme. The large part of the Irish American population (like Reagan himself) would also not have been greatly concerned with the hunger strike or the North, generally preferring to concentrate on financial schemes and aid packages to help the Irish Republic through the recession and the appalling economic situation it had found itself in. The WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) faction of the American establishment which tends to act as the pro-British ethnic group in US politics, would also have been hostile to undue strain in Anglo-American relations.

In conclusion, the 1981 hunger strike was effective in one undisputed area and that was in the attention that it received in the US media. When Sands was nominated for the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election the story was carried in one paragraph of the *New York News*. By the time he died the story was leading the front page and the US news networks each had sent several news crews to Ulster. The coverage was sympathetic to the view that the British should withdraw from the Six Counties and that the issues were essentially those of human rights violations by the UK. This had inevitably rekindled some greater support among the proportion of Americans who supported republicanism or were actively interested in Irish affairs.²⁷

This effect to a lesser extent was true world wide, with the growth of activity in support of Irish republicanism expanding out of the minority communities

27 Tim Pat Coogan, *DISILLUSIONED DECADES, IRELAND 1966-87*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987, 171.

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of Irish descent to include the non-Irish. It was to take several years for the effect of the hunger strike to erode. But, in the longer term the more brutal face of the PIRA began to dominate the world's screens again, with the indiscriminate bombings at Harrods in 1983 and Enniskillen in 1987 eroding much non-republican support. This face was to reduce much of the international sympathy that the hunger strike had gained, just as the Don Tidey kidnapping in the Republic (where a Garda officer and an Irish Army soldier were killed), did similar damage to the hopes of PSF gaining mass support. This came ironically at the time when the party had decided to abandon abstentionism in the Republic and take any seats that were won. However, the PSF have as yet been unable to subsequently win any seats south of the boarder.

8c. THE LONG TERM EFFECT OF THE PRISON DISPUTE.

When one takes a longer term view of the prison dispute it is surprising how little effect it had despite the gloom laden prophesies that commentators were in the habit of making at the time. The most important result of the strike was within the republican movement itself. As has been said earlier, the dispute was an important coming of age for the Provisionals as it marked their first successful attempt at constitutional politics in the North since PSF had been legalised in the 1970's. PSF also gained credibility as an electoral force within the nationalist community, which was to lead to a dramatic change in Northern Irish politics.

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The other principal by-product was the attitude of the British government to the Provisionals and the threat which they presented. The dispute proved that there was an intelligent and politically sophisticated northern leadership in place which had replaced the older conservative Southern based Army Council. The new leadership was still committed to the "armed struggle" but recognised the role of political action within the movement. This was coupled with the evaluation by the government that there could not be a military victory to the conflict, but only a political solution.

In 1982 the Provisionals had been able to reflect upon and assess the 1981 fast and its effect. They had received press exposure both nationally and internationally at a level that they hadn't previously experienced and had arguably won a moral victory in their own eyes. But in the prisons, though the British authorities had given some improvements in conditions, they did not have anything resembling "political status". There was no return to the days of the cages. The authorities remained firmly in control of the blocks. While the prisoners no longer had to wear uniform and 50% of their lost remission was restored, warders still patrolled the blocks. There were liberal rules on association between prisoners inside each half block and they were held separate from the Protestant paramilitary prisoners in the Maze. This was not universal across the Northern Ireland Prison System, an issue that was to

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cause friction threw out the 1980's and early 1990's.²⁸ There was not a return to the total freedom within each compound that existed in the pre-1976 regime. Also there were not the unsupervised meetings of Block OC's or the military style uniforms and training of the 1970's. The most important factor, though, was that much of the Prison regime was not government policy but a liberal interpretation of the rules by prison governors. This was not even a *de facto* recognition of political status as has been argued.²⁹

This has been reinterpreted over the years by the Provisionals who now portray the end of the dispute as a victory. This ignores that the solution was a *fait accompli*, presented by James Prior, which took much of the remaining wind out of the prisoners' sails immediately after they had been forced to abandon the fast. In 1982, on the first commemoration of the hunger strike, the Maze prisoners chose to highlight the fasts in England and the issue of the return of PIRA prisoners to the North from the British mainland and remembered the fasts of 1974 and 1976.³⁰ There was no reference to the complaints that the prisoners still had about the Maze or the no work protest which was to continue until 2 November 1982. The optimistic interpretation of events was also evident in the last sentence of the

28 Danny Morrison, *CRUMLIN ROAD GAOL- THE SEGREGATION BATTLE CONTINUES, THE CAPTIVE VOICE/AN GLOR GAFA*.

Belfast: PSF- POW Dept, Summer 1990, 16-17.

29 Coogan, (1988), 631-632.

30 Unpublished, unsigned prison communication smuggled out of HMP Maze to address the 1982 commemoration of the 1981 hunger strike, May 1982, original in the Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

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communication, "1981 was a sad though historic year in the war for freedom."³¹ In a letter, for a commemoration later in the decade, the Maze prison OC argued that the victory was not in terms of the prison regime but in the boost that PSF had received.

*The victories of the hunger strike are not to be measured in terms of prison life. The real victories can be seen in the resurgence of the nationalist people, the increase in republican membership the pledge of Armalite politics in the days ahead supported by 35% of the nationalists.*³²

In this assessment the prison OC deliberately concentrated on the success of the external campaign and the effect that this had upon PSF as a political movement.

The leaders of the northern wing of PSF had been thinking about going into the constitutional political arena for some time. Gerry Adams has stated that at the time prior to the hunger strike they had planned a slow build up of the electoral strategy. But the stunning success of the H-Block candidates was to have an accelerating effect upon the hopes of PSF.³³ The Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-elections had made Adams a national figure and had ensured that PSF became a credible political force.

The campaign for first Sands, and then subsequently for Carron, had acted as an education for the party in electoral politics. Several years later Adams told the

31 Ibid.

32 Unpublished, prison communication smuggled out of HMP Maze for commemoration of the hunger strike signed by the OC P, dated May 8 (post 1985), original in the Political Collection, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.

33 Gerry Adams. **THE POLITICS OF IRISH FREEDOM**, Dingle, Co.Kerry: Brandon Books, 1987, 86.

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journalist Tim Pat Coogan. *"It was educational for us. We learned about presiding officers, personation officers, how to campaign. It was exhilarating"*.³⁴ Hands-on experience like this did a lot to help compensate for the experienced manpower shortage that the republicans had generally suffered from at the start of the prisons dispute. The invaluable training gained by activists in both the by-elections in the North and the general election in the Republic, equipped PSF with the people that were needed to make "Armalite politics" a viable proposition. There was a second highly useful by-product of the dispute which both PIRA as well as PSF gained from. This was the return to the movement of old activists who had dropped out from republicanism after spells in gaol. These people gave both sections of the movement an injection of skills and maturity which they needed. They had become militant again because of the dedication of the hunger strikers to the movement which at least in the eyes of Adams' had shamed them back again.³⁵

This was to launch the new phase of the Northern conflict with the fighting being carried out upon the political battle field. If one looks at the level of violence in the North (see appendix II) the British military and the RUC had succeeded in the 1970's in reducing the level of violence and numbers of deaths, and with the exception of 1981 when the hunger strike had inflamed passions this downward trend continued until

34 Coogan, (1987), 233.

35 Adams, (1987), 86.

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1986. Further, the British policy of "Ulsterisation" had dramatically reduced the numbers of British troops on the streets. This was reflected in the increase of Irish rather than British deaths as the RUC and the UDR increasingly took the place of the British regiments. This took an important weapon away from the PIRA as they hoped that pressure for withdrawal of the troops could come if too many British deaths were caused. This led to the Provisionals choosing to launch themselves onto the political arena, and the hunger strike proved to be the ideal issue with which to base their campaign. The northerners also used their new stature, gained from the hunger strike, to firmly establish themselves in control of PSF just as they had during the 1970's within PIRA.³⁶ This was first shown by their domination of the 1981 Ard Fheis in Dublin where Danny Morrison gave his famous "*Ballot box paper and Armalite*" speech. In 1982 the Ard Fheis voted to end the federalist Eire Nua policy, following the northerners wish to give no "*sops to loyalists*".³⁷ In 1983, this take over was completed when the President and Vice-President, Ruairi O'Bradaigh and Daithi O'Connell, stood down just as they had been forced to step down from the PIRA Army Council. Adams and his allies now controlled both the principle wings of the republican movement.³⁸

The first test of the expected hunger strikes' effect electorally was in the Northern Ireland Assembly

36 For more details of the northerners control of PIRA see Chapter II.

37 Coogan, (1988), 633.

38 Ibid.

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elections of October 1982. The 1981 election victories were partly caused by a lack of competition for the nationalist vote and the strength of feeling amongst the community that the government should grant the "five demands" of the prisoners, but this was single issue politics and PSF was faced with the rather daunting task of copying this success in multi-party, multi-issue politics. The task was to try to take seats from the constitutionalist non-violent SDLP. They carefully targeted twelve seats and won five at the SDLP's expense.³⁹

The next big electoral test was the 1985 general election when PSF gained 11.8% to the SDLP's 17.8%. This was important to PSF as this was approximately 35% of the nationalist vote.⁴⁰ The greatest victory, though, was the psychological one of Gerry Adams' gaining of Gerry Fitts' West-Belfast seat. Not only did he have the satisfaction of beating Fitt, who stood for anti-sectarian values and constitutionalism, but also he ended the House of Commons' career of the nationalist who had been most vocal against the hunger strikers and the Provisionals.

However, they have been unable to improve on this figure since that period. In the 1987 election the PSF vote marginally declined to 11.4% while the SDLP improved its vote to 21.1% and the Alliance Party increased from 7.1% to 10%. Interestingly the PSF was also threatened from the OIRA who as the Workers Party increased their

39 David Reed, *IRELAND, THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION*, London: Larkin Publications, 1984, 367-368.

40 Cynthia Irvin and Eddie Moxon-Brown, *NOT MANY FLOATING VOTERS HERE, FORTNIGHT*, May 1989.

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vote from 1.6% to 2.7%. In 1992 the Workers Party, all but disappeared. Since 1987 the PSF vote has continued to decline scoring 10% in the General Election of 1992 and losing Adams' West Belfast seat to the SDLP.⁴¹

In the Republic PSF did not repeat its H-Block success in the election of February 1982 losing the two seats which the prisoners had won. By the Dail elections of February 1987 it won 1.9% of the vote and no seats.⁴² PSF has been unable to build up a valid constituency south of the border and its increasingly northern identity has led to it failing to have any real relevance to the vast bulk of the Republic's electorate.

The prospects do not look good for the "Armalite and Ballot Box Paper" succeeding. A negative aspect of the hunger strike to PSF was that it heightened expectation amongst supporters to an unreasonable level, it was not long though before this naivety was ended as Adams has said.

*The stunning initial success with the election of Sands, and Carron and the two in the Republic, gave many the impression that elections were all about winning. It was not until our second intervention in the 26 counties...that our members began to gain some kind of perspective.*⁴³

The profile of the PSF's electorate means that it should not be too complacent. The support tends to be from young people (approximately 50% of PSF voters are aged between eighteen and thirty-four) from semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers (approximately 45% of support comes from social groups D and E). 33.3% of Provisional

41 See Appendix II.

42 Andy Pollak, *DUBLIN: SIX INTO 26 ISN'T GOING*, FORTNIGHT, November 1987.

43 Adams, (1987), 86.

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voters are unemployed compared to only 13% of SDLP voters (below the Northern Irish average). Further, 20% of PSF voters favour an end to the armed struggle which is a large enough proportion to worry any Provisional strategist.⁴⁴

This imbalance makes the PSF vote extremely vulnerable and the drop to only 10% in the recent election, to the benefit of the SDLP, make the future of the two pronged campaign extremely doubtful. This will lead to a re-emergence of the militarist wing of the Provisionals. Thus, the cycle of violence will continue with little hope of ever being completely resolved. If Sands and his nine colleagues proved anything it was the truth of Terence MacSwiney's statement, "*It is not those who can inflict the most, but those that can suffer the most who will conquer*"⁴⁵. At the present those who suffer the most are the Protestant community who see the killing of each RUC and UDR man as a direct attack upon their whole community, and more generally the vast majority of innocent civilians who have seen normal society sacrificed on the sacred altar of Nationalism (whether Irish or British). One lesson which PIRA could have learnt from Sands, which they have ignored, was that he achieved far more in his death than he ever did in his career as a terrorist.

44 Data compiled by the Ulster Marketing Survey in February 1989 and quoted in Cynthia Irvin and Eddie Moxon-Brown, *NOT MANY FLOATING VOTERS HERE, FORTNIGHT*, May 1989.

45 J. Bowyer Bell, *THE SECRET ARMY, A HISTORY OF THE IRA, 1916-1970*, Sphere, London, 1972, 2.

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Unsurprisingly the PIRA's first instinct after Sands died was revenge. In *An Phoblact/Republican News* on 5 September 1981 there were calls for military action to avenge the ten dead hunger strikers. The answer to this request was that this should go without saying. One of PIRA's Dublin bomb makers, Desmond Ellis, constructed a series of devices that he thought were for use in the North. However, they were taken by an ASU that was operating on the Mainland.⁴⁶ This unit was then ordered to embark on a campaign in the home counties to avenge the dead men. The unit which included Paul Kavanagh, Tommy Quigley and Eibhlin Glenholmes (according to police), then set out to attack a series of soft targets that would grab the world's attention. These included the Irish Guards who were based in Chelsea Barracks. This attack in October 1981 instead killed two civilians who were standing near to the bus in which the troops were travelling.⁴⁷ Shortly afterwards, Lt Gen Steuart Pringle was severely injured in the booby trap bombing of his car. Other attacks by this unit included two bombings in central London. One was an attack on a bandstand which resulted in the deaths of seven men of the Royal Greenjackets, and in the other four members of the Household Cavalry died on 20 July 1982.⁴⁸ Subsequently,

46 When Ellis stood trial in the UK in 1991 he was found not guilty by the jury of taking part in the Mainland campaign. His defence did not contest that he had made the devices but said he had been ignorant of their destination and that he had already been convicted and punished by eight years imprisonment in the Republic for this crime where the offence was perpetrated and so faced a "double jeopardy" if convicted.

TIMES 31 October 1991.

47 Clarke, (1987), 205.

48 Coogan, (1988), 646.

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the unit also bombed Harrods just before Christmas 1983, resulting in the deaths of six civilians. Quigley, Kavanagh and the quartermaster from Dublin Natalino Vella, were eventually found guilty at the Old Bailey of causing four explosions in London. This campaign of revenge culminated in an attack upon the Cabinet and the Prime Minister herself at the Grand Hotel, Brighton in October 1984, when a bomb planted by Pat Magee killed five people who were attending the Conservative Party conference, and came within inches of killing Margaret Thatcher.⁴⁹

The PIRA campaign in the North was relatively untouched by the hunger strike, though the Official Unionist MP, Rev Robert Bradford, was killed because of comments made during the fast. The level of violence, as stated earlier, has continued to take a downward trend and the number of casualties inflicted on the security forces has stabilised to between thirty and forty deaths a year.⁵⁰ Thus, while the security forces are not able to defeat the paramilitaries they have been able to contain the violence and enforce governmental control of the Province. While the PIRA has at best managed to maintain a stalemate the security forces are at best maintaining an upper hand in the hope of a political solution sooner or later. This is despite the fact that since the large shipments of arms to Ireland from Libya the PIRA has been better armed than ever before. In 1988, a senior Provisional said that.

49 Bishop & Mallie, (1989), 423-426.

50 See Appendix II, Table One.

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This is the final phase. The next eighteen months to two years will be critical because the IRA has the resources and will know then if it has the capacity to end it.⁵¹

This has patently failed, at the time of writing over three years has passed since the statement was made. The PIRA has not been able to force the British out.

There are several possible reasons for the failure of PIRA to increase the heat of the war. One reason is the brain drain of talent from the military wing of republicanism because of arrests and the use of "Armalite politics". The success of PSF in the 1980's has meant that there is an option available for many of the brightest people attracted to the movement to enter politics rather than the risky life of the gunman. This attrition was combined with people leaving the prisons who having served their time for the movement now wish to settle down. Because of the security force's monitoring of PSF activists this means that they cannot join up with the PIRA again. Additionally, since the Anglo-Irish Agreement the RUC has gained an increased level of support from the minority, leading to people like Bishop Cathal Daly (at the time Bishop of Down and Connor) supporting Catholics who wanted to join the RUC.⁵² Finally, since the Anglo-Irish agreement cross-border co-operation has increased between the security forces in the North and in the Republic. This has constrained the freedom of movement for terrorists. Thus, the PIRA has been unable to hit too many British targets while the UDR

51 Eamonn Mallie, *THE PROVOS' RESURGENCE: THERE'S MORE TO COME*, FORTNIGHT, September 1988.

52 Robert Bell, Robert Johnstone & Robin Wilson, *TROUBLED TIMES- FORTNIGHT MAGAZINE AND THE TROUBLES 1970-91*. Belfast: Black Staff Press, 1991, 215.

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and RUC have, due to their increased presence on the streets, curtailed much of the Provisional's ability to fight.⁵³ Yet despite this the PIRA will continue to operate and the statement given by a spokesman for the Army Council is probably correct.

*We can't be beaten; there is no question of us winning in the sense of driving the British Army into the sea. But we always maintain the capacity to bring the situation to a crisis at some stage.*⁵⁴

The British, after the end of the hunger strike, were keen to try and stabilise the situation again and then try and find some form of political solution. It was recognised as early as 1978 in a British army intelligence report that the Provisionals campaign would probably last as long as Ulster stays part of the Union.⁵⁵ This has prompted a military policy of containing and limiting the PIRA rather than to try to fight it full on. This has involved an increased use of covert operations, informers, and restricting the availability of easy targets which, combined with "Ulsterisation", has meant that the politicians have been given space in which to try and find a solution to the Irish problem.

Once the crisis of 1981 was resolved by the defeat of the hunger strike, it was followed immediately by an enlightened liberalisation of the prison regime. The

53 Sean O'Neill, *HITTING THE TARGET*, FORTNIGHT, September 1988.

54 Coogan, (1988), 650.

55 Document by Brigadier Jim Glover, titled *NORTHERN IRELAND: FUTURE TERRORIST TRENDS*, dated 2 November 1978, captured by PIRA.

Published as an appendix to Sean Cronin, *IRISH NATIONALISM—A HISTORY OF ITS ROOTS AND IDEOLOGY*, Dublin: Academy Press, 1980, 339-357.

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hunger strike could not be said to have had any long-term direct effect on British policy. It did however confirm in the minds of British politicians that it was time to look at the problem again. The strike had illustrated to politicians that the new leadership was well led, and that the enemy were in their own way men to respect. In 1991, Lord Gowrie the Minister responsible for the prisons during James Prior's period as Secretary of State said: "*I respect the integrity of the hunger strikers.*"⁵⁶ This personal view probably reflected the seriousness with which the government took the rise of PSF. This led to the recognition of the need to counter its rise as an electoral force. It also led to a re-assessment by the government of the extent of the loyalist veto on constitutional change, resulting in increased cooperation with the SDLP and the Irish government. These changes have led to a series of initiatives and reforms which have tried to address the grievances of the nationalist community.

The reform process ultimately led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985 by FitzGerald and Thatcher. This addressed many of the grievances of the nationalist community by giving the Irish government a consultative role in Northern Irish affairs. It has led to the consolidation of the SDLP vote and the decline in electoral success for PSF.⁵⁷ Ultimately this led to the defeat of Gerry Adams in West Belfast and PSF's lowest

56 *PACK UP THE TROUBLES, CRITICAL EYE*, Exco Television for Channel 4, broadcast 24 October 1991.

57 Coogan, (1988), 235-237.

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ever Province wide vote (10%) in 1992 since it embraced electoral politics in 1982.

However, it must be remembered that despite the decline in fortunes of PSF it could always re-emerge, especially if it can find some issue with which it could tap into mainstream nationalist opinion again. It is vital that the government remains aware of this danger and if possible heads off any controversies before they become major issues over which a new generation of Irish republican martyrs could be created.

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CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined events in modern Irish history which, though based around the republican prisoners in the Maze, were to have repercussions out with the Prison. It was the importance of this which was one of the initial attractions of the subject and as a theme- the effect which the hunger strikers were to have on Ulster generally- it has underlined the thesis. The study also sought to examine the motivations behind the self-inflicted suffering which the prisoners embarked on, first in the "dirty" protest and then in the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981.

The leadership of the PIRA changed during the 1970's when the young Northerners under the leadership of the late Seamus Towmey displaced the more (small c) conservative largely Southern leadership. This was another theme that ran through the whole period.

The Northerners had the intention of dramatically changing the whole nature of the conflict in the Province. It has been noted that this included securing the structure of the PIRA brigades, and the creation of the Active Service Units (ASU) which were based on a closely knit cell structure. These units included the use of specialists and often operated outside their own regions. This increased the security within the movement and greatly reduced the influence of the Southerners. They then retreated into PSF, but the Northerners wanted to change the party's strategy as well. The prisons

crisis proved to be the ideal vehicle with which to do this. The use of the dispute as a single issue was to prove as important as the anti-internment campaigns of the early 1970's in attracting popular sympathy from the nationalist community. Further, the stature of the Northerners was greatly increased within the movement by the success that the external campaign had in winning this sympathy.

The success of Northerners, now under the leadership of Gerry Adams and his allies Danny Morison and Martin McGuinness, was proved at the PSF ard fheis of 1981 when the federalist Eire Nua (New Ireland) plan was dropped from party policy. In 1982, this was further demonstrated when all aspects of federalism were dropped from the constitution of the party. This resulted in the resignation of Ruarai O'Bradaigh and Daithi O'Connell from the leadership and the election of Adams to become President of PSF. Eventually, these moves prompted a split in 1986 over the issue of abstentionism within Ireland. The split was prompted by O'Bradaigh and O'Connell who were suspicious of this overtly political move that possibly threatened the "armed struggle". They formed a small party which became known as Republican Sinn Fein. This split would not have happened without the boost in electoral fortunes which the hunger strike brought to PSF.

The rise of PSF was to contribute indirectly to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Government recognised that the constitutionalist SDLP was threatened by the rise of the Provisionals. The prospect of PSF becoming the voice of

Northern nationalists was not one that the Government would have relished. Any form of legitimacy for the armed struggle within the nationalist community would have been a disaster on the international stage as well as leading to the increased questioning of the British presence in Ulster that this could produce within the UK itself.

This wish to stabilise the position of the SDLP, as well as the need to try and find some form of resolution of the conflict, was to lead to an attempt to resolve nationalist grievances within the framework of the UK. This was to become the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. While the effect of the hunger strike has been over estimated with regard to the signing of the agreement, it is unlikely that the chain of events that led to the accord would have occurred without the hunger strike giving PSF a position that had to be addressed. Thus, one can argue that the agreement was indirectly caused by the fast.

The hunger strike itself was only the last event in the prison dispute which began in 1976. As a subject of study the dispute proves a very interesting microcosm of the whole Northern Irish conflict. The confrontation in the prisons illustrated the different ways the conflict was perceived by republicans, nationalists, unionists and the government.

Essentially, the British government perceive the Northern problem as one of an ethnic conflict where they stand neutral between the two communities. This is reflected in the way mainland politicians refer to the Irish Problem, while republicans view the conflict as one

of national liberation and will pointedly talk of Ireland's British problem. The unionists look on the conflict as a defence of the right of self determination for the majority of the population in the Province and an attempt to preserve the right to a British identity and their existence in Northern Ireland. The nationalists of the SDLP along with moderate pro-union Alliance Party try to find a middle ground between the extremes. In one way or another all sides in the conflict make a claim for the moral high ground and passionately believe in the righteousness of their cause.

In the prisons the republican prisoners were prepared to live in the appalling self-inflicted conditions to bring about what they regarded as their rightful demand to be treated as political prisoners of war. In doing this they chose to walk in the footsteps of previous Fenian and IRA prisoners who had refused to accept that they were criminal prisoners. It was no surprise that the prisoners would react so violently when one remembers that republicans have a great sense of history which is thought to them from early childhood. They see themselves as the latest successors of a history of Celtic resistance to Anglo-Saxon domination. This line stretches back eight hundred years to the first Norman invasion led by Strongbow in 1170. Much of this republican mythology involves the struggles inside the prisons dating back to Fenians like Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa who in the nineteenth century claimed the right to be Prisoners of War.

Thus, when Merlyn Rees announced the end of special category status he was laying down a direct challenge to the prisoners. The men who were to go on the "blanket" would have felt that they were betraying their predecessors if they did not fight to regain the privileges, which had been won in 1972, by a hunger strike. Given that it was won by a hunger strike it is no surprise that by 1980 the prisoners had decided that they had to try the weapon of last resort- the fast. The conditions of the "dirty" and "blanket" protest meant that there was a steady erosion of men this led the protest, leading to the feeling that the protest should be finished quickly by bringing it to a peak. The outside assassination campaign against prison officers had been as unable to move the government as the protests within the prison. Further, the new party in power in London had a past history of giving in to the hunger strike weapon. Indeed, the threatened hunger strike by the President of Plaid Cymru, had helped to ensure that the new commercial fourth channel in Wales would be largely in the Welsh language.¹

However, the prisoners made a mistake in assuming that the British would give in to such tactics when used by convicted criminals. The Conservative Party had dramatically changed since the Heath government of the

1 In May 1980 Gwynfor Evans, threatened a fast when the Government refused to honour a manifesto promise to have Channel Four in Wales as a Welsh language station (S4C). His fast was to start on the 6 October 1980, but on the 17 September it was announced that the pledge would be honoured.

David Beresford, **TEN MEN DEAD**, London: Grafton, 1987, 34-35.

1970's. The new leadership was aggressively opposed to the PIRA and the premier, Margaret Thatcher, was being advised by William Whitelaw who had, as Northern Ireland Secretary, granted special category status. This was granted in the context of many of the prisoners being interned without trial and a cease fire with the Provisionals. Nether of these factors was in play in 1980/81. The Northern Ireland Secretary at this time, Humphrey Atkins, has subsequently said that one of the problems with the fast was that the prisoners did not believe the government when it said that it would not give in to the hunger strike. As history proved, this was a grave misjudgement by the Provisionals.

By February 1981 the prison leadership faced a moral dilemma. The first hunger strike had ended inconclusively. The prisoners and authorities had different interpretations of the proposed reforms that had been agreed in December 1980. The prisoners felt that they had been cheated by the government and faced the choice of either accepting the limited reforms of the authorities or embarking upon a second hunger strike. This fast, the prisoners realized, would result in the death of at least one hunger striker. Aside from the practical problems: PSF faced restarting the external campaign while the PIRA faced the armed struggle being placed into the background as the world looked on the Maze Prison, there also remained an important moral question to be answered.

Most of the Provisional prisoners were practising Roman Catholics, yet the Church is fundamentally opposed

CHAPTER IX

to suicide as an act of violence against oneself. Suicide is by extension an act of violence against God in whose image mankind is believed to have been made. This was a question which Bobby Sands discussed with the prison chaplains, who felt that the fast was acceptable if it was a technique for winning reforms, but if the intention was death in itself then it was wrong and a sin. This interpretation was open to argument. The British Catholic Church was opposed from day one, while the Irish Church was divided. Bishop Cahal Daly, of Derry, was opposed to the hunger strike in principle, while Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich was more sympathetic to the arguments of the prisoners, stating that no body went on hunger strike with the intention of killing themselves. However, after the first few deaths it became apparent that the British would still not give in even if every prisoner in the Maze were to die on a fast. The British were taking a principled stance that this tactic was a form of moral blackmail which it would not give in to. This reduced the strike to a mere body count with the Provisional leadership on the outside trying to make as much mileage of this as they could in the political campaign. Once the aim of the strike had undeniably become death in itself, rather than a form of protest, the Catholic Church turned against it. Such a position was not going to have much effect on the prisoners who, despite their own faith, were used to being condemned by the Church. But the relatives were a different matter; many were not necessarily PSF supporters and were generally far more ready to listen to the Church. After the failure of the

intervention by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, because of Provisional intransigence, the Church and specifically Fr Denis Faul, an assistant Chaplain at the Maze, decided to campaign against the strike. As the prisoners remained unresponsive he went to the relatives, who had the right to ask for medical intervention after the prisoner was no longer conscious. He asked the relatives of the surviving strikers to make their intention to intervene known and thus present a *fait accompli* to the prisoners. The prisoners were furious, but could do nothing, and thus they announced that on 3 October 1981, that the fast was over.

The question that is asked about the hunger strike, in regard to the policy of the United Kingdom government, was whether it should have been possible to reach a compromise on prison conditions before the crisis reached the point of no return with the hunger strikes.

The view of the SDLP is that the government could and should have resolved the problem, probably in 1979 and certainly in 1980 both before and after the hunger strike of that year. On the other hand one must remember the reasons why special category status was abandoned in the first place. When the government Committee under Lord Gardiner reported on the prisons in Northern Ireland it stated that special category status had been a "*serious mistake*".² The whole committee had been appalled by the situation inside the prisons, most importantly it felt

² Lord Gardiner (chair), REPORT OF A COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER, IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS, MEASURES TO DEAL WITH TERRORISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND, London: HMSO, 1975, 33.

that the authorities had no control over the inmates and that the prisons were not succeeding in their aim of reforming the convicted terrorists. Further, the continuation of special category status had convinced the prisoners that there would be an amnesty which the committee felt should be refuted by abolishing the special category prisoners, thus signalling that the British would not withdraw and that there would be no amnesty, reinforcing the deterrent value of gaol. The government agreed, and had not changed their Irish policy since 1976 (the date of abolition) and were not prepared to give any form of legitimisation to the PIRA or create any false illusions that might encourage young people into the paramilitaries. If anything, the success of the international H-Block support movement in attracting attention meant that the government were even more determined not to be seen to lose the dispute.

It was probably in the summer of 1980 that the British could have reached an acceptable compromise with the prisoners. It has been argued that the Provisionals were desperate for an issue with which to launch their campaign within constitutionalist politics, and that they would not have accepted anything other than a return to special category status because of the prisons role as a propaganda tool. While the campaign was useful in this role, it would have been unlikely that PSF could have anticipated the dramatic electoral gains that it won through the spin off from the strike. Had this been the case PSF would have contested the 1980 local elections. Further, whatever the result of the fast it would have

been long since over by the next election which would have been the general election predicted for 1983. They would not have expected the by-election which was caused by the death of its MP. By chance this was one of only four or five seats in which a republican could have stood and reasonably expected to win. No strategist would have even dreamed of the possibility of standing a candidate until the MP, Frank Maguire, had died and even so it was touch and go whether Sands would stand. Apart from these factors, historically prison hunger strikes were notoriously unpredictable and were a protest which the Provisionals would have preferred not to use other than as a weapon of last resort. They looked on the prison dispute as an important matter, but it distracted from the armed struggle and the ultimate aim of re-uniting Ireland. At this time the prisoners were at the end of their tether with very low morale amongst the "blanketmen", and large numbers were leaving the protest and conforming in order to keep the very generous remission of sentence (50%) which the NIO gave to the prisoners. They would almost certainly have accepted a face-saving measure like the conditions introduced by Jim Prior in October 1981. However, the British were unwilling to accept any form of defeat, especially inside the prisons. This meant that it took the first hunger strike to get them to address the issue. The 1980 fast ended in confusion because the prisoners were not prepared to see a man die at the point when it looked as if the protest was resolved. Again at this stage the British, with a bit of bargaining, could probably have

resolved the dispute, but the authorities' inflexibility was returned with interest by the republicans. Had the five points been negotiable rather than carved in stone they probably could have reached a deal on prison conditions that was acceptable to the authorities. However, there was a complete failure by either side to understand the other's position.

The strike completely failed to end the three-party consensus in Westminster on Irish policy or even on penal policy. There had been some activity by traditional republican sympathisers in organisations like Troops Out, who formed Charter 80 to campaign for the fast; but the majority of the British population remained apathetic about Ireland. Internationally, while the dispute was a useful propaganda issue the pressure failed in persuading the governments who could pressurise the British to do so. Once the immediacy of the fast was over the pro-republican international propaganda returned to the normal noise level.

The 1981 hunger strike ended after the death of ten men inside the prison. Outside the prison system, the protest directly and indirectly cost the North over thirty other lives in the violence surrounding the campaign from 1976 to 1981. This was the cost of the new regime introduced by James Prior and his successors. By giving a series of extremely generous concessions, while the republicans were reeling from the shock of defeat, the government had ensured that the prisoners eventually had to accept defeat, though it took until November 1982

before the no work protest was finally dropped by the prisoners.

The hunger strike and the violence that surrounded it had ensured that the British public and media had to take notice of the Irish problem again. While the fast continued the republicans gained an attention not seen since the early 1970's. The media interest probably prolonged the fast because of this factor. Subsequently, other fasts by prisoners have received little or no attention from the media in an attempt to deprive them of the "oxygen of publicity".³ This is self-imposed and almost certainly designed to prevent a repeat of the 1981 situation.

The Churches in Ireland, like the press, reacted to the fast largely as could be expected. The Protestant Churches followed the line that the hunger strike was self inflicted suicide and so broke divine law. They felt that the government could not respond to the moral blackmail of the fast. The Roman Catholic Church though took a far more ambivalent stance. The men were given Christian burial on the principle that even if they were suicides they should be given the benefit of the doubt and buried according to normal church practice. On the point of definition the Irish Catholics were more divided some like Bishop Daly, arguing from the start that the men were suicides. Others, such as Cardinal O'Fiaich and Fr Faul felt that the initial fasts were not suicide but

³ The best example of this was the hunger strike by Desmond Ellis, a former PIRA bomb maker, who fasted to try and prevent his extradition from the Republic to the UK in October/November 1990, which received practically no attention from the British media until his acquittal.

legitimate protest. However, after the death of the second hunger striker Francis Hughes this became increasingly unsustainable as the British were obviously not moved. The fast then started to resemble a death strike- a fast with the intention of dying- which was without doubt suicide. This was wrong and so the Church then set out to end the hunger strike eventually leading to Fr Faul persuading the relatives of hunger strikers to threaten to intervene, thus emasculating the fast.

Republicans have gradually revised their public interpretation of the resolution of the fast, from being wholly unacceptable to a great victory. The reality is different as the Provisionals, although they definitely won the propaganda battle, were unable to win in the prison. Subsequently, by indiscriminate attacks killing civilians, they lost much of the support gained outside the Province.

As one can see in Appendix II (Table Two), the support of the Provisionals within the North would seem to have remained at a fairly stable (though gradually declining) level, polling between 10% and 12%.⁴ But in the Republic the percentage of the vote has dropped from 4.9% in 1984 to 1.85% in 1987. This is despite the fact that during 1986, in an attempt to have a relevance in the Republic, for the first time in its history, the republican movement dropped abstentionism. It seemed that once the single issue of the prisons was solved then

⁴ After the PSF high-point in the 1983 general election of 13.4% the vote dropped to 11.8% (1985) then to 11.3% (1989) and finally 10% (1992). See Appendix II, Table Two.

republican-minded voters drifted back to Fianna Fail. With the exception of the physical force republican minority in the Catholic community of the North, it seemed that the Provisionals and the ten hunger strikers proved to be more successful when their violence was directed against themselves, rather than against anyone else. As a terrorist Sands was not very successful, yet as a martyr he achieved some of the highest levels of support any militant republican has had since Partition. He had also succeeded in getting Irish, British and international attention directed at Northern Ireland in a way the PIRA had failed to do since the early 1970's or since the 1981 fast.

However, the politicians within the Provisionals are unlikely to ever get the chance to escape their stagnant position. The PSF are a minority party within a minority group, and as such if their influence was only in relation to their vote they would be relegated to a minority role approximately the same as the Alliance Party. Yet, at the present they are a vital factor in any assessment of the situation. The reason for this is the link to the gunmen in PIRA- not the level of public support for PSF.

APPENDIX I

GLOSSARY OF THE IRISH WORDS
AND EXPRESSIONS USED.

The following Irish words have been used in the Thesis with a translation in the text where necessary.

Ard Fheis: Party Conference.

An seachtain dona: The bad week, the name given by prisoners to a week of alleged ill-treatment by warders.

An Uachtaran: President

Cealachan: To achieve justice by starvation as recognised in the Senchus Mor.

Cumann na mBan: The female wing of the IRA, after the reorganisation of the PIRA in the late 1970's it operationally merged with the male wing, it now only exists in a ceremonial manner.

Cumann na nGaedheal: The first government of the Free State, see Fine Gael.

Dail Eireann: House of Representatives, the Irish Parliaments lower house.

Eire Nua: New Ireland, the federalist policy proposed by PSF in the 1970's dropped in 1982 from the party constitution.

Fianna Fail: Solders of Destiny, the party that was formed by Eamon de Valera in 1926 after the anti-treaty IRA/Sinn Fein split, famed for its parochial right wing Irish nationalism.

Fine Gael: Clan of the Gales, the party that traces itself from Cunian na Gaedheal the faction of the IRA and Sinn Fein that supported partition and formed the Irish Free State, became Fine Gael after a merger with the small Centre Party in 1933.

Garda Siochana: Civic Guards, the police force formed by the Free State as a replacement for the old imperial Royal Irish Constabulary.

Oglaigh na hEireann: The IRA.

Oireachtas: The Irish Parliament.

Poblacht na hEireann: The Republic of Ireland.

Radio Telefis Eireann: (RTE) Radio Television of Ireland, the Irish State broadcasting organisation.

Sceal: News, the name used for gossip and news among the prisoners in the H-Blocks.

Seanad Eireann: The Senate, the upper house of the Irish Parliament.

Senchus Mor: The Medieval Irish civil code.

Sinn Fein: Ourselves Alone/We Ourselves, Political party formed in 1905 became aligned to the IRA and is the political wing of Republicanism this century though frequently suffering from splits, up to the split between the Provisionals and Officials in 1969 and the creation of Republican Sinn Fein in 1987.

Taoiseach: Prime Minister.

Teachta Dala: (TD) Member of the Dail.

Trosscad: To fast on or against a person, as recognised in the Senchus Mor.

APPENDIX II

STATISTICS OF THE NORTHERN IRISH CONFLICT 1969 - 1990

TABLE ONE:- VIOLENT DEATHS 1969 - 1990

Year	RUC	RUCR	Army	UDR	Civil	Total
1969	1	-	-	-	12	13
1970	2	-	-	-	23	25
1971	11	-	43	5	115	174
1972	14	3	103	26	321	467
1973	10	3	58	8	171	250
1974	12	3	28	7	166	216
1975	7	4	14	6	216	247
1976	13	10	14	15	245	297
1977	8	6	15	14	69	112
1978	4	6	14	7	50	81
1979	9	5	38	10	51	113
1980	3	6	8	9	50	76
1981	13	8	10	13	57	101
1982	8	4	21	7	57	97
1983	9	9	5	10	44	77
1984	7	2	9	10	36	64
1985	14	9	2	4	25	54
1986	10	2	4	8	37	61
1987	9	7	3	8	66	93
1988	4	2	21	12	54	93
1989	7	2	12	2	39	62
1990	7	5	7	8	49	76
Total	182	96	429	189	1956	2849

Source: RUC, STATISTICAL INFORMATION, 1969- FEBRUARY 1991. Belfast: 1991.

TABLE TWO:- PARTY SHARE OF VOTES

Party	1979a	1982b	1983c	1985d	1987e	1989f	1992g
OUP	36.6	29.7	34.0	29.5	37.8	31.4	34.5
DUP	10.2	23.0	20.0	24.3	11.7	17.8	13.1
Other Union	+	5.7	+	3.1	2.5	4.8	+
APNI	11.9	9.3	8.0	7.1	10.0	6.8	8.7
WP	+	2.7	+	1.6	2.7	2.1	+
SDLP	19.7	18.8	17.9	17.8	21.1	21.2	23.5
PSF	*	10.1	13.4	11.8	11.4	11.3	10
Others	21.6	0.7	6.7	4.8	0.0	4.6	4.5
Conservative	*	*	*	*	*	*	5.7

All figures are shown as percentages

+ listed in the "Others" line.

* Did not stand for election.

<p>a General Election, Source; <u>THE TIMES GUIDE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS JUNE 1983</u>. London: Times Books, 1983.</p> <p>b Assembly Election, Source; F, Magee, <u>NORTHERN IRELAND SINCE 1979</u>. London: Longman, 1984.</p> <p>c General Election, Source; <u>THE TIMES GUIDE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS JUNE 1983</u>. London: Times Books, 1983.</p> <p>d Local Election (1st pref%), Source; <u>FORTNIGHT</u>, May 1989.</p> <p>e General Election, Source; <u>FORTNIGHT</u>, May 1989.</p> <p>f Local Election (1st pref%), Source; <u>FORTNIGHT</u>, June 1989.</p> <p>g General Election, Source; <u>FORTNIGHT</u>, June 1992.</p>
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APPENDIX III

**A CHRONOLOGY OF THE PRISONS
DISPUTE 1976 TO 1981.**

30 January 1975,

The report of a committee chaired by Lord Gardiner called for an end to special status for scheduled offenders and the introduction of conventional cellular prison accommodation in Northern Ireland.

Source; Lord Gardiner. REPORT OF A COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS, MEASURES TO DEAL WITH TERRORISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND. Cmnd Paper 5847, London: HMSO, 1975, 33.

16 February 1976,

The Northern Ireland (Treatment of Offenders) Act was moved before the House of Commons by the secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Merlyn Rees. The principal component of this act was the incorporation of the Gardiner Report's recommendations that special category status should be removed from paramilitary prisoners in Ulster.

Source; HANSARD, HOUSE OF COMMONS OFFICIAL REPORT 1975-76, COMPRISING THE PERIOD 9 TO 20 FEBRUARY, 1976, coll 1077-1080.

1 March 1976,

The cut off day after which people who committed scheduled offences ceased to qualify for special category status and the HMP Maze Cellular Compound was opened for new prisoners on the site of the Long Kesh Prison, this was subsequently become infamous as the H-Blocks.

Source; Robert Bell, Robert Johnstone & Robin Wilson. TROUBLED TIMES, FORTNIGHT MAGAZINE AND THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1970-91. Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1991, 176.

8 April 1976,

Patrick Dillon was shot near his home in Omagh, the first prison officer murdered, in PIRA's prisons campaign.

Source; APRIL CALENDAR, FORTNIGHT, 7 May 1976.

19 April 1976,

Prison officer John Cummings was shot dead.

Source; APRIL CALENDAR, FORTNIGHT, 7 May 1976.

15 September 1976,

Kieran Nugent became the first Republican prisoner to refuse to wear prison uniform and so became the first prisoner to go "on the blanket".

Source; Tim Pat Coogan, **ON THE BLANKET- THE H-BLOCK STORY**, Swords, Co Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980, 79-82.

8 October 1976,

Prison officer R.J. Hamilton was killed in a gun attack outside his home in Londonderry.

Source; *DATELINES*, **FORTNIGHT**, 5 November 1976.

22 June 1977,

A prison officer Weseley Millaken of the Crumlin area of Belfast was murdered.

Source; *JUNE DIARY*, **FORTNIGHT**, July 1977.

7 December 1977,

Desmond Irvine, chair of the Northern Ireland Prison Officers Association was murdered by two gunmen as he left a union meeting.

Source; **TIMES**, 8 December 1977.

26 November 1978,

Albert Miles, the deputy governor of the Maze Prison, Long Kesh was shot dead at his home in Belfast. The attack was conducted by PIRA as part of the prisons campaign.

Source; **TIMES**, 27 November 1978.

11 December 1978,

Two prison officers were shot and wounded in a machine-gun attack on their way home from work at Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast.

Source; **GUARDIAN**, 12 December 1978.

12 December 1978,

Three Prison Officers wives were hurt by letter bombs sent by PIRA.

Source; **DAILY TELEGRAPH**, 13 December 1978.

14 December 1978,

A prison clerk J.M.McTier was killed by republicans.

Source; Coogan, (1980), 153.

4 February 1979,

A retired Catholic prison officer Patrick Mackin and his wife Violet were murdered by the Provisionals in their North Belfast home.

Source; **FINANCIAL TIMES**, 5 February 1979.

& **DAILY TELEGRAPH**, 6 February 1979.

See also Martin Dillon. **THE DIRTY WAR**, London: Arrow, 1991, 394-396.

16 April 1979,

A prison officer M.C.Cassidy was shot dead by the PIRA at his sisters wedding in Co Tyrone.

Source; Bell, Johnstone, & Wilson, (1991), 186.

& Coogan, (1980), 153.

19 April 1979,

A female prison officer A.J.Wallace was murdered.

Source; *DIARY 1978/79*, **FORTNIGHT**, November 1978 to August 1979.

14 September 1979,

Two prison officers were shot in a social club near where they worked at the Crumlin Road Prison, Belfast, G.Foster was killed while the other was seriously wounded. This fell on the third anniversary of the first conviction of a PIRA member who was not classed as special category.

Source; **GUARDIAN**, 15 September 1979.

19 September 1979,

A deputy governor of the Crumlin Road Prison, was shot dead a few yards from the prison Edward Jones had stopped at traffic lights in the area which was known for its Republican sympathies.

Source; **DAILY TELEGRAPH**, 20 September 1979.

21 October 1979,

At a conference at the Green Briar Hotel in Andersonstown organised by the Relatives Action Committee a pro-prisoner/anti-Unionist coalition was formed including PSF, IRSP, Peoples Democracy and other groups forming the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.

Source; Gerry Adams, **THE POLITICS OF IRISH FREEDOM**, Dingle Co.Kerry: Brandon Books, 1987, 76-77.

5 November 1979,

A prison officer T.Gilhooley was killed by the PIRA in Belfast.

Source; Coogan, (1980), 153. And Bell, Johnstone, & Wilson, (1991), 187.

7 November 1979,

A prison wages clerk Mr D.W.Teeny was killed by the INLA.

Source; Coogan, (1980), 153. And Bell, Johnstone, & Wilson, (1991), 187.

23 November 1979,

A prison officer G.F.Mulville was murdered.

Source; Coogan, (1980), 153.

3 December 1979,

A fifty-eight year old senior prison officer, William Wright, was shot dead by PIRA as he walked from his car to the front door, at his home in West Belfast.

Source; **DAILY TELEGRAPH**, 4 December 1979.

17 December 1979,

Senior prison officer Mr W.Wilson was killed.

Source; **TIMES**, 18 December 1979.

18 December 1979,

A conference held in Dublin created a Southern sub-committee of the National H-Block/Armagh committee to co-ordinate anti-H-Block activity in the Republic.

Source; David Reed, **IRELAND THE KEY TO THE BRITISH REVOLUTION**. London: Larkin Press, 1984, 319.

18th January 1980,

A prison officer G.F.Fox was murdered.

Source; Tim Pat Coogan, (1980), 153.

4 June 1980,

John Turnly a Protestant and the leader of the Independent Irish Party and H-Block activist was murdered by loyalists while returning from an H-Block meeting.

Source; **TIMES**, 6 June 1980.

19 June 1980,

The European Commission on Human Rights released its report on the case of five blanketmen who demanded political status. This was refused by the commission which found in favour of the UK government.

Source; **GUARDIAN**, 20 June 1980.

26 June 1980,

Miriam Daly a lecturer at Queens University was shot dead at home by loyalists, she was a former chair of IRSP and a member of the National H-Block/Armagh Committee.

Source; **TIMES**, 28 June 1980.

15 October 1980,

A leading Protestant member of the INLA and the IRSP Ronnie Bunting, and Noel Lyttle were killed by loyalist terrorists while Buntings wife was injured at their home in the nationalist Andersonstown area. This was part of an on going campaign to kill H-Block activists by the UDA/UFF.

Source; **TIMES**, 16 October 1980.

27 October 1980,

The names of the seven hunger strikers who started their fast on this date were publicly released, they were Thomas McFeely, Thomas McKearny, Brendan Hughes, Leo Green, Raymond McCartney, Sean McKenna, and John Nixon.

Source; **TIMES**, 28 October 1980.

1 December 1980,

Three female prisoners at Armagh Prison embarked upon a hunger strike demanding political status. They were Mairead Farrell, Mary Doyle, and Mairead Nugent. The male hunger strikers were moved to the prison hospital.

Source; **TIMES**, 1 December & 2 December 1980.

12 December 1980,

Six Protestant UDA members in the Maze Prison, Robert Adams, Norman Earle, William Mullan, Thomas Andrews, Samuel Courtney, and Samuel McClean went on hunger strike to demand the segregation of paramilitary prisoners.

Source; **TIMES**, 12 December 1980.

15 December 1980,

In order to increase pressure upon the authorities twenty-three more Republican prisoners refused food and started a fast. In a statement the condition of the original hunger strikers was given as the reason for this escalation.

Source; **TIMES**, 16 December 1980.

18 December 1980,

The five still lucid hunger strikers in the Maze chose to call off the fast after the Northern Ireland Office indicated that it would be possible to compromise on the issue, and that Sean McKenna was close to death if he was not treated.

Source; Adams, (1987), 77-78.
& Patrick Bishop & Eamonn Mallie, **THE PROVISIONAL IRA**.
London: Corgi, 1989, 360-361.

5 January 1981,

The National H-Block/Armagh Committee ruled out a new hunger strike for the time being. Bernadette McAliskey (nee Devlin) on behalf of the committee alleged that the British government had reneged on private assurances made at the end of the 1980 fast.

Source; Bell, Johnstone & Wilson, (1991), 189.

16 January 1981,

Loyalists attempted to assassinate the former MP and National H-Block/Armagh Committee member, Bernadette McAliskey.

Source; **IRISH TIMES**, 17 January 1981.

21 January 1981,

The former Speaker of the Northern Irish parliament Sir James Strong and his son Norman were murdered by PIRA in retaliation for loyalist attacks upon H-Block activists.

Source; **TIMES**, 22 January 1981.

28 January 1981

In the Maze prison, ninety-six prisoners smashed furniture and had to be returned to empty cells after an attempt to place them in furnished cells.

Source; *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 22 January 1981.

9 February 1981

It was announced by the PSF office in Belfast that a new solo hunger strike by Bobby Sands would begin on the 1 March 1981, Sands would be followed two weeks later by other hunger strikers.

Source; *IRISH TIMES*, 10 February 1981.

1 March 1981,

Bobby Sands refused his breakfast and started his hunger strike.

Source; *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 3 March 1981.

2 March 1981,

The dirty protest was called off to concentrate attention upon Sands' hunger strike.

Source; *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 3 March 1981.

14 March 1981,

Frances Hughes became the second PIRA hunger striker.

Source; *TIMES*, 13 March 1981.

22 March 1981,

Two new hunger strikers started their fast they were Patsy O'Hara (INLA) and Raymond McCreesh (PIRA).

Source; *IRISH TIMES*, 23 March 1981.

24 March 1981,

A British business executive was shot three times in the leg by a man shouting pro-hunger strike slogans during a conference in Trinity College, Dublin. The H-Block/Armagh Committee and the PIRA denied any involvement.

Source; *MARCH DIARY, FORTNIGHT*, May-June 1981.

9 April 1981,

Bobby Sands won the by-election in Fermanagh and South Tyrone caused by the death of the sitting member Frank Maguire on a "*Smash the H-Blocks*" ticket. Sands, won 51% of the vote to the Official Unionist Harold West's 48.8%.

Source; *TIMES*, 11 April 1981.

19 April 1981,

In Londonderry two Catholic youths were killed by an army landrover during rioting caused by tension over the condition of Sands. One was named as James Brown aged 17. A PSF statement threatened that if the dispute was not solved the previous violence would seem like a "*Buckingham Palace tea party*"

Source; *TIMES*, 20 April 1981.
& *GUARDIAN*, 20 April 1981.
& *APRIL/MAY DIARY, FORTNIGHT*, July 1981.

24 April 1981,

A four man delegation from the European Commission for Human Rights arrived in Belfast in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 5 October 1981.

29 April 1981,

The Popes personal emissary, Fr John Magee, arrived in Belfast in an attempt to save Sands' life.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 5 October 1981.

5 May 1981,

Bobby Sands died as result of his sixty-six day fast at 1.17 am.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 5 May 1981.

6 May 1981,

In the rioting after Sands' death twenty-one people were injured, resulting in the deaths of a milk man Eric Guiney and his fourteen year old son Desmond Guiney, after their milk float was attacked by rioters.

Source; *INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE*, 6 May 1981.
& *IRISH TIMES*, 9 May 1981.
& *DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 14 May 1981.

7 May 1981,

Between 50,000 and 100,000 people attended Bobby Sands funeral.

Source; **TIMES**, 8 May 1981.

9 May 1981,

A replacement hunger striker for Sands was announced as Joe McDonnell (PIRA).

Source; **OBSERVER**, 10 May 1981.

10 May 1981,

The increased tension caused by the fast led to a UDA show of strength where 300 men in paramilitary uniform took part in "*mobilisation exercises*" in Londonderry.

Source; **IRISH TIMES**, 12 May 1981.

12 May 1981,

A second hunger striker died as a result of his fast. Francis Hughes died after a fifty-nine day strike.

Source; **GUARDIAN**, 13 May 1981.

13 May 1981,

Cardinal O'Fiaich, sent a telegram to Mrs Thatcher, saying "*In Gods name don't allow another death*".

Source; **GUARDIAN**, 5 October 1981.

14 May 1981,

A teenage girl from Andersonstown died as a result of head wounds. Julie Livingstone aged fourteen was hit by a plastic bullet fired by soldiers during a riot on the 12 May 1981.

Source; **IRISH TIMES**, 14 May 1981.

14 May 1981,

Hughes was replaced by a new hunger striker Brendan McLaughlin.

Source; **FINANCIAL TIMES**, 15 May 1981.

21 May 1981,

Two hunger strikers Raymond McCreesh (PIRA) and Patsy O'Hara (INLA) died after a sixty-one day fast.

Source; **IRISH TIMES**, 22 May 1981.

22 May 1981,

Two people died as a result of wounds from plastic bullets, one, Carol Kelly aged twelve, was hit on the 19 May while the other, Hugh Dully aged forty-four, was hit on the 22 May during pro-prisoner riots.

Source; DAILY TELEGRAPH, 23 May 1981.

23 May 1981,

The local elections in the Province result in the victories of two IRSP and two Peoples Democracy candidates who in the process managed to defeat Gerry Fitt in his former seat in Belfast City Council. Due to an abstentionist policy PSF did not stand.

Source; Adams, (1987), 83.

27 May 1981,

Brendan McLaughlin abandoned his fast after fourteen days because of complications from an ulcer, this was not felt by the Provisionals to be an appropriate way to die.

Source; TIMES, 28 May 1981.

29 May 1981,

The PIRA prisoner who took McLaughlins place was named as Martin Hurson.

Source; IRISH TIMES, 29 May 1981.

8 June 1981,

A new PIRA hunger striker Tom McIlwee embarked on his fast.

Source; GUARDIAN, 8 June 1981.

11 June 1981,

In the Republic's general election, two prisoners from the Maze were elected to the *Dail*. They were Paddy Agnew and Kieran Doherty, in the nine seats contested by prisoners they win a total of 40,000 votes.

Source; GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

14 June 1981,

A bomb found outside Queen's University turned out to have fallen off the car used by Lord Gardiner, the Judge who recommended the abolition of special status. He had been attending a seminar at the Law Faculty of the University.

Source; TIMES, 15 June 1981.

15 June 1981,

Patrick Quinn, a member of the PIRA, was the latest prisoner to embark upon a hunger strike.

Source; *TIMES*, 15 June 1981.

22 June 1981,

Michael Devine, an INLA prisoner, embarked upon a hunger strike.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 23 June 1981.

8 July 1981,

The PIRA prisoner Joe McDonnell died as a result of his sixty-one day fast.

Source; *IRISH TIMES*, 9 July 1981.

13 July 1981,

Martin Hurson a 27 year old PIRA prisoner died after a fast of forty-five days.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 14 July 1981.

15 July 1981,

The PIRA prisoner Matt Devlin started a hunger strike as the replacement for Hurson.

Source; *IRISH TIMES*, 15 July 1981.

1 August 1981,

An INLA prisoner Kevin Lynch died after a seventy-one day hunger strike, and the PIRA prisoner Paddy Quinn ended a forty-seven day fast after his relatives intervened and sought medical intervention.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 1 August 1981.

2 August 1981,

The TD for Cavan/Monaghan, PIRA prisoner Kieran Doherty died after a seventy-three day fast.

Source; *GUARDIAN*, 3 August 1981.

8 August 1981,

Thomas McElwee a PIRA prisoner became the ninth prisoner to die on hunger strike.

Source; *OBSERVER*, 9 August 1981.

9 August 1981,

A man killed by a plastic bullet during rioting was named as Peter McGuinness aged forty.

Source; GUARDIAN, 10 August 1981.

10 August 1981,

The replacement for Kieran Doherty, Pat Sheehan a member of the PIRA, started a new fast.

Source; IRISH TIMES, 10 August 1981.

17 August 1981,

The replacement for Thomas McElwee was named as Jackie McMullan a PIRA member.

Source; IRISH TIMES, 17 August 1981.

20 August 1981,

Patrick McGeowan was moved to hospital after his mother intervened ending his forty-seven day fast.

Source; GUARDIAN, 21 August 1981.

20 August 1981,

Michael Devine a member of the INLA died after a sixty day fast he was the tenth and final hunger striker to die.

Source; GUARDIAN, 21 August 1981.

21 August 1981,

Owen Carron, Bobby Sands' former election agent won the Fermanagh/South Tyrone seat in the by-election that Sands death had caused winning 31,278 votes on an abstentionist anti-H Block ticket. To the Official Unionist Ken Maginnis' 29,048.

Source; IRISH TIMES, 22 August 1981.

23 August 1981,

A PIRA member, Bernard Fox, was named as the next prisoner to start a hunger strike.

Source; DAILY TELEGRAPH, 24 August 1981.

31 August 1981,

A PIRA member, Hugh Carville, joined the hunger strike.

Source; INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE, 1 September 1981.

4 September 1981,

The mother and brother of Mathew John Devlin intervened to end his fast after fifty-two days.

Source; DAILY TELEGRAPH, 5 September 1981.

6 September 1981,

The relatives of Laurence McKeown intervened to save his life after a seventy day fast. The INLA also announced it would not put members up for a fast as frequently as it had before.

Source; GUARDIAN, 7 September 1981.

14 September 1981,

In a Cabinet reshuffle James Prior became the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, while Lord Gowrie took over responsibility for the prisons from Michael Alison.

Source; GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

14 September 1981,

The PIRA announced that Gerard Hodgins (27) would become the latest addition to the hunger strike.

Source; GUARDIAN, 14 September 1981.

24 September 1981,

Bernard Fox came off his thirty-two day fast because of a kidney complaint.

Source; GUARDIAN, 25 September 1981.

26 September 1981,

Liam McCloskey the remaining INLA hunger striker came off his fifty-five day fast.

Source; IRISH TIMES, 28 September 1981.

27 September 1981,

At a meeting held by an assistant prison chaplain, Fr Denis Faul, the families of five of the remaining hunger strikers agreed not to allow them to die.

Source; GUARDIAN, 5 October 1981.

3 October 1981,

The hunger strike was formally called off, after ten deaths and 216 days. This decision was reluctantly taken by the prisoners after the families of the five of the six men on the fast indicated that they would intervene to save the men's lives.

Source; *OBSERVER*, 4 October 1981.

6 October 1981,

The new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, James Prior, announced at a press conference in Belfast a new package of prison reforms. The prisoners were permitted to wear their own clothes (but not paramilitary uniforms), up to half of lost remission was restored, and association was partially increased.

Source; *TIMES*, 7 October 1981.

2 November 1982,

The last remaining relic of the prison dispute was abandoned by 145 republican prisoners, when the no-work protest was finally discontinued.

Source; Reed, (1984), 368. And Bell, Johnstone & Wilson, (1991), 195.

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