

Hunger strike secret channel of communications discussed

BRITISH government officials discussed how to address claims of back channel communications with the IRA during the 1981 hunger strikes. THE question of the existence of the secret communications channel was discussed by senior Northern Ireland Office (NIO) officials, declassified files show. It was discussed in a memo dated November 16 1988 to NIO permanent secretary Sir John Belloch, who had served as deputy secretary and a key British adviser during the hunger strikes. The memo from Stephen Leach of the NIO referred to questions that Irish-American academic Pádraig O'Malley wished to ask Belloch at a forthcoming interview on the hunger strikes for a new book. The interview was to be unattributable. Leach said the questions concerned "the hypothesis that during the first and second hunger strikes there was a secret channel of communication between the government (and in particular, the FCO) [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and the leadership of the republican movement via an intermediary known as 'Mountain Climber'". According to Charles McLean, the British Consul General in Boston, O'Malley claimed to have been told by several sources "that the 'Mountain Climber' did indeed exist". In the memo Leach warned Belloch that O'Malley wished to ask him specific questions about the intermediary's existence. He said: "During the second hunger strike in June/July 1981 ... the Irish Commission of Justice and Peace [ICJP] had some meetings with senior republican figures including Gerry Adams. 'Adams told them in confidence about the Mountain Climber and indicated that a 'good offer' had recently been received via this channel."



■ **INTERVIEW:** The 10 republican prisoners who died while on hunger strike in the Maze Prison in 1981

The official added that shortly after this "Adams told the ICJP that the Mountain Climber had become inoperative and that the offer had lapsed". Leach added that in July 1981, "Mountain Climber was reactivated and on 19 July he allegedly passed a 'better offer' which the republican leadership wanted to accept". He added: "However, the prisoners themselves refused to accept this

offer without public assurances on certain points. These were not forthcoming and no compromise was therefore reached." O'Malley's question, Leach told Belloch, was "whether the NIO was aware of these goings-on". Following his interview with the academic, Sir John Belloch wrote a note for the record, dated November 23 1988. He said: "In answer to O'Malley's

[questions about] contacts between Mountain Climber and the IRA, I rested on two main propositions: a/ I did not myself believe that there were in effect two government positions, one being deployed by the NIO and one by somebody else. "2/Of course government, in seeking to... explain its position, used [many] contacts, including ones where we could be reasonably sure that any message would... find its

way to the IRA." It was later revealed that a back channel existed, while the 'Mountain Climber' was Michael Oatley, an MI6 agent whose contacts with the IRA went back to the 1970s. Oatley was to re-emerge in the early 1990s in contacts with Martin McGuinness, authorised by Northern Ireland secretary Peter Brooke with a view to ending the violence.

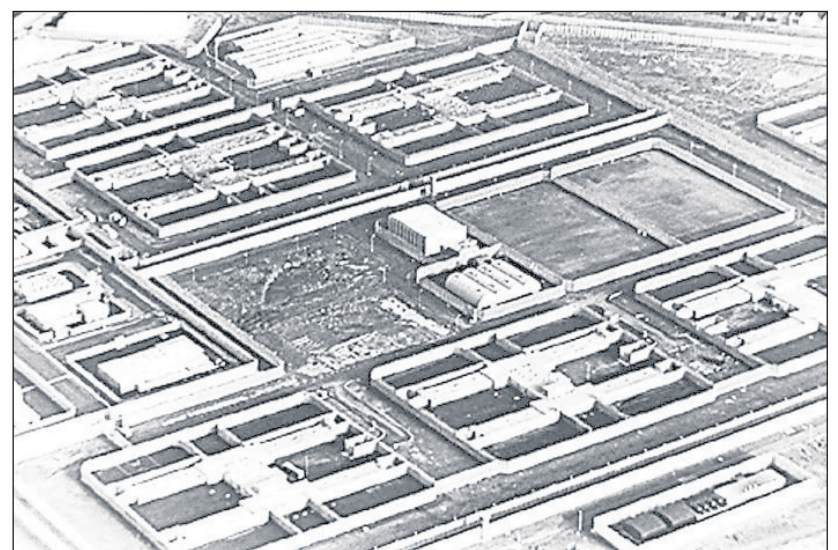
Mixed response to information request

AN IRISH-American historian's request for interviews over the 1980-81 hunger strikes at the Maze prison received a mixed response from Northern Ireland Office officials. Pádraig O'Malley had made a request for a series of interviews with ministers and officials involved in the hunger strikes. He met with NIO minister Nick Scott to discuss the matter in 1986, five years after the pivotal 1981 hunger strike in which 10 IRA and INLA men died. But the professor's request elicited varying responses from officials,

newly released files from the Public Record Office in Belfast show. RJ Kendrick, director of prison operations at the NIO, was against offering any assistance to the project. "We have already seen one hunger strike saga which in my view should not be allowed into our prisons," he said. However, in a handwritten note dated July 1986, senior official SC Jackson felt that O'Malley's book "might well turn out to be a serious, not wholly unbalanced study of the 1980/81 hunger strikes". "These were, in any view, significant events of legitimate public

interest", he said. O'Malley's request received strong backing from Nick Scott. He wrote to two former ministers of the hunger strikes era, former Northern Ireland prisons minister Michael Allison and his successor Lord Gowrie. Scott wrote to Allison in August 1986 commending O'Malley's motives and academic integrity. "[He] has worked very hard in the past to try to bring a greater level of understanding between the people of the troubled north and his impartiality and intelligence are sought out by anyone who is responsible for

the political future of Ireland," he said. As a result, arrangements were made for the Boston-based academic to interview Sir John Belloch, the deputy under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence (MOD), who had been the key advisor to Allison during the hunger strikes. The discussion between Belloch and O'Malley took place at the MOD in London on September 24 1986 and was tape-recorded. Transcripts exist in the file as well as a detailed aide memoir from Belloch to Sir Robert Andrew, the permanent secretary at the NIO.



■ **DISCUSSIONS:** The H Blocks at the Maze Prison