

Why did the hunger strike end in October 1981?

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Two days later, on 31 July, Mrs Quinn intervened to save her son's life. She was a determined woman and was not going to let her son die. She directed medical intervention, which a family was entitled to do. Paddy Quinn was rushed to hospital and remained in a coma for two days. When he came round, his mother was at his bedside. 'Mummy,' he said. 'I'm sorry if I upset you. It is good to be alive.' It was the beginning of the end of the hunger strike although it was to be another two months before it finally ended. Father Faul had located its Achilles' heel, and the final, dreadful phase had begun. There were to be no more attempts at resolution. The Government had made its final offer through the 'Mountain Climber' initiative and the prisoners had given their response. Kevin Lynch died on 1 August after seventy-one days. Kieran Doherty died the following day after seventy-three days. His girlfriend, Geraldine, was heartbroken. She had been desperate to save his life but, as she was not family, was unable to do so. A week later, on 8 August, Tom McIlwee died after sixty-five days, and on 20 August, Mickey Devine died after sixty-six days of refusing food. He was the last hunger striker to die. I remember going to a council house on Derry's Creggan estate and seeing his body lying in the coffin in the living room. Masked men stood around it as the INLA honour guard. Men and women trooped by, crossing themselves and silently saying prayers. A knot of people hung around outside. More than three months earlier, an estimated 100,000 people had come to Bobby Sands' funeral. In comparison, a handful came to 'Red Mickey's'. The day of the funeral, Sinn Fein's Owen Carron defeated his unionist opponent, Ken Maginnis, in the Fermanagh—South Tyrone by-election and succeeded Bobby Sands as the Member of Parliament. Canon exceeded Sands' vote by 786 on an increased turnout of 88.6 per cent.

Despite the stalemate and continuing deaths, prisoners continued to join the hunger strike, a measure of their commitment and determination not to be beaten, although few had any illusion that in so doing they were likely to die. To the incomprehending world outside, they seemed like lemmings. But as prisoners joined, others were being taken off by their families. It was as if the wheel was spinning both ways. On 6 September, Laurence McKeown's family authorized medical intervention on the seventieth day of his hunger strike. They were the fourth family to intervene. He has only a vague recollection of what happened.

You're very sleepy and very, very tired and you're sort of nodding off to sleep but something's telling you to keep waking up. This was the thing that kept everybody going through the hunger strike in trying to live or last out as long as possible. I knew death was close but I wasn't afraid to die — and it wasn't any sort of courageous or glorious thing. I think death would have been a release. You can never feel that way again. It's not like tiredness. It's an absolute, total, mental and physical exhaustion. It's literally like slipping into death.

How did you feel about your mother after she'd taken you off?

I didn't feel any way different about her because I just knew that she had stood by me all that time anyway. I could understand her point of view. A number of people had made interventions. She wasn't politically committed to my ideas but she was committed to me as a son. I certainly didn't ever say anything to her that would have been hurtful. I think much was left unspoken.

A week later, on 13 September, there was a significant change in the implementation of British Government policy. Humphrey Atkins departed and James Prior became Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The following day, Gerard Hodgkins joined the hunger strike. Prior had not wanted the job which he knew had few compensations but, after a series of differences with Mrs Thatcher, he reckoned there was not much else on offer and reluctantly, he packed his bags for Belfast. Why did he think Mrs Thatcher had given him the job?

She wanted to get rid of me from London, I think, more than anything. I think she thought perhaps that I had some of the qualities that could be useful in Northern Ireland but I suspect it was much more that she wanted me out of the way. I saw the hunger strike as a great obstacle to making progress on anything else and I didn't think I could begin to make political progress with the hunger strike still in operation and therefore I wanted it ended.

I asked Lord Prior what advice Mrs Thatcher had given him on how to handle the hunger strike. Remarkably, he said that she had given him none.

One of the first things the new Secretary of State did was to visit the Maze prison. He looked through a window of a cell and saw one of the hunger strikers lying there. It was the INLA prisoner, Liam McCloskey, who was on the forty-fifth day of his hunger strike. 'It had a profound effect on me,' Prior recalls. 'I expected to find someone who was very upright

and struggling and very uncomfortable. But this man seemed to be serenely quiet and content with himself and not in any particular pain.' The following day, McCloskey's mother asked to see him. Prior was advised that he should leave it to his Deputy, Lord Gowrie, who then reported back to Prior. Mrs McCloskey had said that she did not want her son to die and that when he lapsed into a coma she would take him off. 'I would like you to know that my son is not a criminal,' she said. 'He was a bad boy and he should not have shot that person. But if I thought he was a criminal I would never allow him to come inside my house again.' Prior learned fast. 'That told me a great deal about the attitude and the mentality of the Republican community.' Mrs McCloskey was true to her word, and on 26 September, she intervened and took Liam off hunger strike.

It was now virtually all over. Liam McCloskey was the fifth prisoner to be taken off by his family. A week later, on 3 October, the hunger strike was finally called off completely. The families of the remaining six men had indicated that they too would intervene. The hunger strike had collapsed. Gerard Hodgkins, who at its end had been fasting for twenty days, had mixed emotions.

The hunger strike had started out as a prison struggle for political status but it came to encapsulate the whole struggle for us. We believed that if we lost out on this one, we'd lost the war and everything that went with it. Everything we had sacrificed to date would have been in vain. We genuinely believed that we had to hold out. We hoped to salvage something.

On one hand you felt relieved that it was over, that you weren't going to die. You were relieved for your family. On the other hand, you felt guilty: that you'd actually ended the hunger strike and you hadn't achieved what you set out to achieve. Although you were going to live, you had to live in the knowledge that there were ten men dead who had set out on the same journey. You wonder, 'Have I betrayed them? Have I betrayed their families?' I would still think about it even to this day.

Three days later, Jim Prior announced a series of partial concessions: prisoners would be allowed to wear their own clothes at all times; there would be fifty per cent remission of time lost through the protests; greater freedom of association between adjacent wings of the H-Blocks; more visits; and the definition of prison 'work' would be reviewed. The Secretary of State was far too sensible to claim victory. The tragedy was that much the same had been on offer almost three months before, when only six men had died. In the interim, four more had gone to their graves.

The Hunger Strike is a watershed in the history of the Republican Movement. Although the deaths of ten men made it clear to the British Government that the IRA was determined to see its 'struggle' through to the end, regardless of the cost, its real historical significance lies in the election of Bobby Sands and Owen Carron to Westminster. Their victories laid the foundation for the political base that Gerry Adams knew had to be built if the 'struggle' were to progress. Sinn Fein's electoral successes through the next two decades are the hunger strike's political legacy. Many years on, a senior NIO prison official told me he thought the hunger strike was 'a magnificent achievement'.

Three years after the hunger strike, on 16 October 1984, the Provisionals took their revenge. The IRA planted a twenty-pound bomb with a delayed timer in the Grand Hotel, Brighton, where Mrs Thatcher and most of her Cabinet were staying for the Conservative Party's annual conference. The bomb exploded at 2.54am, collapsing the building like a pack of cards. Five members of the Conservative Party were killed. Mrs Thatcher narrowly escaped. The IRA declared that she would have to be lucky all of the time: they only had to be lucky once. The prisoners shed no tears.