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**The Gaelic Athletic Association and the H-Blocks Crisis,
1976 – 1981**

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The Gaelic Athletic Association and the H-Blocks Crisis, 1976 – 1981

Mark Reynolds

This thesis will explore how the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was affected by the escalating series of protests initiated by Irish republican prisoners in the Maze Prison (H-Blocks) during the period 1976 – 1981. The thesis will detail the pressures that were placed upon the various units of the GAA, from internal and external sources, to publicly support the demands of the protesting prisoners. The thesis will question how the GAA, an organisation perceived by many as nationalist/republican in outlook, responded to these demands, while at the same time responding to those from within and outside the association who were against any form of GAA support for the prisoners.

The support the GAA gave to the prisoners will be explored in the context of the historical relationship between the GAA and Irish political prisoners, the relationship between the GAA and An Garda Síochána, and the rulebook of the GAA which, post-1979 stipulated that the GAA was a non-party-political organisation. The thesis will question if the support that some clubs, predominantly clubs in Northern Ireland, gave to the prisoners was universally appreciated within the GAA or if such support caused internal divisions. The thesis will also ask if the crisis affected the GAA on a short-term basis only, or if it left a lasting legacy.

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Introduction

The 1976-1981 H-Blocks crisis was a seminal moment in the history of modern Ireland and the Irish republican movement. The crisis began in 1976 when republican prisoners initiated a series of escalating protests in an attempt to regain special-category-status, and ended with the 1981 hunger strike, during which ten men died. Several books have been published about the crisis, and continue to be published today, almost thirty-five years after its conclusion. Danny Morrison, writing in *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike*, calls the 1981 hunger strike 'the historic event of the North since the foundation of the state in 1921' and states that 'many republicans refer to the hunger strike as their "1916"'.¹ As F. Stuart Ross has shown, in *Smashing H-Block, The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign against Criminalisation*,² the street campaign that accompanied the escalating protests by the prisoners briefly facilitated the coming together of the usually fragmented nationalist community in Northern Ireland. Thomas Hennessey has further shown that a 'variety of special factors' in the lead up to the 1980 hunger strike had hardened local nationalist attitudes towards the British security forces, and that 'many in the community, while holding no truck with the Provos' campaign of violence, supported the hunger strikers out of an emotional 'herd' attachment, and as an expression of 'anti-establishment/anti-Brit solidarity'.³ The National H-Block Committee, formed in 1979 to spearhead a street campaign in support of the prisoners, appealed to the trade union movement, community organisations, journalists and cultural organisations, including Conradh na Gaeilge and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), to issue statements in support of the prisoners and to have a visible presence at the various local and national H-Block marches. For a very brief period, the H-Blocks crisis united the various shades of nationalism, republicanism and republican-socialism, but, as shall be discussed in Chapter Three, this unification did not last until the conclusion of the hunger strikes.

Paradoxically, the hunger strike is credited with rejuvenating the IRA, while at the same time the election of republican prisoners Bobby Sands, Kieran Doherty and Paddy Agnew is credited with popularising constitutional politics within the republican movement. Gerry

¹ Danny Morrison, *Hunger Strike: Reflections on the 1981 Hunger Strike* (Kerry: Mount Eagle Publications, 2006), p. 19.

² F. Stuart Ross, *Smashing H-Block The Rise and Fall of the Popular Campaign against Criminalisation, 1976-1982* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

³ Thomas Hennessey, *Hunger Strike. Margaret Thatcher's Battle with the IRA, 1980-1981* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p. 104.

Adams, speaking in 2011, stated that the ‘Hunger Strike changed the political landscape in Ireland’ and that ‘the political gains [made by the republican movement] since then owe much...to the sacrifice, resolve and perseverance of the Hunger Strikers’.⁴ Politically, the hunger strikes affected both the Irish and British governments, although Hennessey has shown that the hunger strike was ‘more of a problem for Dublin for than London: for Charles Haughey and Garret Fitzgerald it became the main political issue in their diplomatic relations because it had such an impact domestically’, whereas for Margaret Thatcher, who had ‘no real domestic pressure in Great Britain, it was one of a long series of issues, including severe economic issues.’⁵

While the effects the H-Blocks crisis had on modern Ireland and the republican movement has received much scholarly attention, the effects that the crisis had on the GAA has not received the same attention. This is despite repeated assertions from former GAA officials that the H-Blocks crisis was one of the most difficult periods in the history of the association.⁶ This thesis seeks to address that gap in the history of the GAA, by both detailing and analysing the actions (and inactions) of the GAA during the crisis.

To be properly understood, the relationship between the GAA and the H-Block prisoners must be explored in the context of the historical relationship between the GAA and republican prisoners. There has always been a relationship between the GAA and Irish political prisoners. Two of the original patrons of the association, Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt, had previously been imprisoned for political activities;⁷ the issue played a role during the 1887/1888 split and reconstruction,⁸ while, in the context of the ‘Ranch War’,⁹ Rule 8 (excluding the British military from the association) was amended in 1909 to exclude jail

⁴ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 468.

⁵ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 460.

⁶ Paddy McFlynn, ‘75 Years Out of 125: A Lifetime in the GAA’ in Dónal McAnallen, David Hassan & Roddy Hegarty (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA. Ulaidh, Éire agus Eile* (Armagh: Stair Ulaidh, 2009), pp. 11-19.

⁷ Parnell was imprisoned in Kilmainham Jail in 1881 under the terms of Protection of the Person and Property Act, 1881. Davitt was imprisoned on two occasions; in 1870 he was convicted of ‘Treason Felony’ and served seven years, of a fifteen year sentence, in Dartmoor Prison; following an outspoken speech against the Chief Secretary of Ireland, Davitt’s ticket of leave was revoked in 1881 and he spent one year in Portland Prison. Sean McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922, Theatres of War* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁸ At the 1887 Convention it was Edward Bennett’s refusal to pass a motion of sympathy with the imprisoned William O’Brien that caused most consternation amongst constitutional nationalists; at the 1888 Convention the IRB proposed the imprisoned John Mandeville as President as a means of stopping Davin’s return to the post. W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association & Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987).

⁹ See Chapter 3 of Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891-1921* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2004).

warders from membership of the GAA.¹⁰ It was during the Irish Revolutionary years, 1916-1923, that the relationship between the GAA and political prisoners evolved - the association became actively involved with prisoners and in prisoner welfare issues. This relationship, however, was not always harmonious; having supported the political prisoners throughout the War of Independence, the GAA had to reschedule three (delayed) 1923 All-Ireland finals, as republicans had actively pressurised clubs and county boards to cancel scheduled games, as a means of protesting against the continued detention of republican prisoners. The relationship between the GAA and political prisoners, during the period 1916-1969, manifested itself in three different ways. First, Gaelic games, with the support of the GAA, were played in internment camps and prisons, including Frongoch, Ballykinlar, the Curragh internment camps and Belfast Jail, as an act of cultural resistance. Second, the GAA contributed to the various prison welfare funds during this period, including the Irish National Aid and Volunteer Dependents Fund, the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund, the Irish Prisoners National Aid Society, the Green Cross Committee and An Cumann Cabhrach. Third, the GAA publicly supported prisoners during periods of prison protests, including hunger strikes. As shall be discussed in Chapter One, these three facets of the relationship between the GAA and political prisoners were maintained after the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in 1969, but were radically altered by the political status protests that were initiated by the republican prisoners in 1976.

There are many publications that deal with the historical relationship between the GAA and republican politics, some of which detail the relationship between the GAA and political prisoners. Several publications focus on the role the GAA played during the revolutionary period of 1913-1923, to the point that William Murphy has commented that the role of the GAA 'during the Irish Revolution has received more, if often fragmented, attention than most aspects of the association's history.'¹¹ Both de Búrca¹² and Mandle¹³, in their respective seminal publications, detail the links between the GAA and the revolutionary politics, with both authors somewhat overstating the importance of the GAA to the independence struggle. Some of the more recently published articles and publications, including those by Richard

¹⁰ 1909 Annual Convention Minutes, Central Council Minute Book [CCMB] 1899-1911, p. 453.

¹¹ William Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish Revolution, 1913-1923' in Mike Cronin, William Murphy and Paul Rouse (eds.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 61-76.

¹² Marcus de Búrca, *The GAA: A History* (Dublin: Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, 1980).

¹³ Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association & Irish Nationalist Politics 1884-1924*.

McElligott¹⁴ and Dónal McAnallen,¹⁵ have taken a more balanced approach and agree with Murphy's memorable phrase that the GAA appeared 'to have been a playground of the revolution more often than it was a player in the revolution.'¹⁶ Eamonn Boyce's prison memoirs give a detailed and insightful understanding of the importance of the GAA, and Gaelic games, to those imprisoned in Belfast Jail during the 'Border Campaign' of 1956-1961.¹⁷ While not as numerous as those dealing with the period 1913-1923, there are some publications that deal with how the GAA reacted to reality of the partition of Ireland and, later still, the outbreak of the 'Troubles'. Mike Cronin argues that the GAA in Northern Ireland continued to play the role it had played in pre-partition Ireland, in that the association played a central role in defining nationalist identity and, to a certain extent, was a vehicle for nationalist agitation.¹⁸ Similarly, David Hassan writes that during the 'Troubles', the GAA, as an All-Ireland body, represented a sporting manifestation of northern nationalism's 'political utopia' but, in reality, the Dublin based leadership could do little for its northern members, other than offer the occasional expression of sympathy.¹⁹ While some publications, including *How the GAA Survived the Troubles*,²⁰ *Leading Through the Troubles, A Life in the GAA*²¹ and *The Outsider*²² make reference to how the H-Blocks crisis affected the GAA, the crisis is not the main focus of these publications and it is not really discussed in any great detail.

This thesis seeks to explain how the GAA, an organisation perceived by many as nationalist and republican in outlook, reacted to the H-Blocks crisis. The thesis will ask how the various units within the hierarchy of the GAA - clubs, county boards, provincial councils and the national leadership committees (Central Council and Coiste Bainisti) - responded to the pressures that were placed upon them from internal and external sources to publicly support the demands of the protesting prisoners. The actions that some GAA units, clubs in Northern

¹⁴ Richard McElligott, '1916 and the Radicalization of the Gaelic Athletic Association', *Éire-Ireland*, Volume 48, Issue 1&2, 2013, pp. 95-111.

¹⁵ Dónal McAnallen, 'The Radicalisation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ulster, 1912-1923: The Role of Owen O'Duffy', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Volume 31, Issue 7, 2014, pp. 704-723.

¹⁶ Murphy, 'The GAA during the Irish Revolution, 1913-1923' in Cronin, Murphy & Rouse (eds.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009*, p. 76.

¹⁷ Anna Bryson (ed.), *The Insider. The Belfast Prison Diaries of Eamonn Boyce, 1956-1962* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland, Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999).

¹⁹ David Hassan, 'The GAA in Ulster' in Cronin, Murphy & Rouse (eds.), *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884-2009*, pp. 77-92.

²⁰ Desmond Fahy, *How the GAA Survived the Troubles* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001).

²¹ Paddy MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles, A Life in the GAA – Paddy MacFlynn* (Tyrone: Lumen Publishing, 2013).

²² Peter Quinn, *The Outsider* (Dublin: Irish Sports Publishing, 2013).

Ireland in particular, took in support of the protesting prisoners will be detailed. The actions of these clubs, however, will be explored in the wider context of events and factors that existed at the time that restricted association support for the prisoners. The two key factors that restricted the association's support for the prisoners were the public rows that erupted between the national leaderships of the GAA and the Garda Representative Association (GRA) and Rule 7 of the GAA's rule book. In 1980 and 1981 the GAA was accused by the GRA of being ambiguous in its condemnation of republican violence. In the resultant public row, played out through the media, the GAA was portrayed as being sympathetic to IRA violence. The leadership of the GAA bore these accusations in mind when considering the appropriate level of support that the association could lend to the republican prisoners. Post-1979, Rule 7 of the GAA's rulebook stated that the association was a 'non-party-political' association. The participation of National H-Block candidates in the 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland, and to a lesser extent the 1981 Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election, was interpreted by some within the GAA as an entry to party politics and, thus, support for the H-Block campaign was deemed to be in contravention of Rule 7. There was also a vocal minority, led by Tom Woulfe and John O'Grady, who vigorously opposed any GAA support for, or involvement with, the protesting H-Block prisoners, and who used the media to further their case. The thesis will question if the actions of some clubs, who came out in support of the prisoners, caused divisions within the association. Finally, this thesis will analyse the effect the H-Blocks crisis had on the GAA, and ask if the crisis affected the association on a short-term basis only or if the crisis left a lasting legacy within the GAA.

Chapter one of this thesis will detail the relationship between the GAA and Irish political prisoners, internees and convicted prisoners, during the period 1969-1976. This relationship will be explored in the wider context of the GAA's reaction to the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. The chapter will ask what type of support the GAA provided to those interned and imprisoned as a result of the outbreak of political violence, and it will also explore the role that Gaelic games played within the Long Kesh compound.

Chapter Two will address how the GAA responded to the series of escalating prison protests that took place within the H-Blocks between 1976 and 1980, including the 1980 hunger strike. This chapter will ask how the ending of internment and the initiation of the protests by convicted republican prisoners changed the dynamics of the relationship between the GAA and the H-Block prisoners. This chapter will examine the early relationship between the GAA and the National H-Block Committee, and will also address how the campaign mobilised by the

National H-Block Committee affected the GAA and GAA members. The reaction of the GAA to the 1980 hunger strike will be explored in the context of the public row that erupted between the GAA and the GRA over allegations that the GAA was ambiguous in its condemnation of republican violence.

Chapter Three of this thesis will explore how the GAA reacted to the 1981 hunger strike. This chapter will detail the pressure the GAA came under, from internal and external sources, to support those on hunger strike. The chapter will detail and analyse the actions that the various units of the GAA took in support of the hunger strike. It will also look at the reaction of other GAA members who were opposed to any support for the prisoners from the association and, furthermore, it will detail how those from outside of the GAA viewed any GAA support for the hunger strikers. The ramifications of the National H-Block Committee's decision to enter candidates in the by-election in Fermanagh/South Tyrone and the 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland will be detailed in the context of the GAA's 'non-party-political' rule, and the resultant fall-out from the directive issued by Liam Mulvihill, Director-General of the GAA, that all forms of GAA support for the prisoners must cease will be analysed. The reaction of the GAA to the deaths of the ten hunger strikes, five of whom were GAA members, will be discussed, as will the reaction of the GAA to the conclusion of the hunger strike.

The conclusion of the thesis will reflect on the crisis and ask whether it had a lasting impact upon the association. The crisis had the potential to affect the GAA's medium to long relationships to the Irish and British governments, the Irish and British security forces, the republican and loyalist communities, and the media. The conclusion will question if such consequences are evident. Perhaps more importantly, the crisis had the potential to change the GAA. The conclusion will question if the crisis influenced or changed the policies of the association, while at the same time asking if the crisis affected the association's image of itself and its sense of purpose. This conclusion will also analyse if the crisis had a long term effect on the relationship between the GAA in Northern Ireland and the GAA in the Republic of Ireland.

Mike Cronin, in *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland*, explains that, against the backdrop of the 'Troubles' the history of 'sport matters because it is... a mirror for the troubles that lead to the killing. To understand the deaths in Northern Ireland as a battle between two identities on opposing sides of a sectarian divide is to understand sport.'²³ David Hassan, in 'Sport,

²³ Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland*, p.143.

Identity and Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland' explains that Northern Irish nationalism cannot be defined as an all-encompassing doctrine and that within this nationalism exist differing views, ranging from those who, more than anything else, desire to see a United Ireland to those who simply want to be able to express their Irish identity and who care little for the constitutional question.²⁴ This thesis will use the GAA as a prism to investigate how the H-Blocks crisis, and the hunger strikes in particular, affected the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. Similar to *Smashing H-Block*, this thesis will investigate how the different facets of Northern Irish nationalism responded to a political and humanitarian crisis and how this crisis both united and divided the nationalist community. This thesis, however, will investigate how the leadership of the GAA kept the association from splitting in the context of such nationalist division.

²⁴ David Hassan, 'Sport, Identity and Irish Nationalism in Northern Ireland' in Bairner, Alan (ed.), *Sport and the Irish Histories, Identities, Issues* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), pp. 123-139.

Chapter One: 1969-1976

The outbreak (1969) and early years (1969-1976) of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland represented a significant challenge to the GAA, the Ulster GAA in particular. Throughout the 'Troubles', the Ulster GAA sought to maintain its broad non-political nationalist stance but 'in practice it could not avoid becoming involved in an ethno-sectarian conflict that was to dominate national and international affairs for the latter part of the twentieth century in Northern Ireland.'¹ While the GAA, at a macro-level, attempted to remain detached from the 'Troubles', at local levels, association clubs and members were 'actively engaged in both the civil rights campaign and the spiralling problems that engulfed the region'.² The outbreak of the 'Troubles', and the consequent re-introduction of internment in Northern Ireland in August 1971, dramatically increased the prison populations throughout Ireland and England, with internees (Northern Ireland only) and sentenced prisoners dispersed throughout the penal systems. During the period of internment, which officially ended on 5 December 1975, a total of 2,060 suspected republicans and 109 suspected loyalists were interned, predominantly in the Long Kesh Camp, situated on the outskirts of Lisburn.³ In addition to the internees, several hundred Irish republican convicts were dispersed in jails throughout Ireland and England during this period. Many of those interned and imprisoned as a result of the political turmoil were GAA members. This chapter will detail the relationship that existed between the GAA and political prisoners (convicted republican prisoners and internees) between 1969 and 1976, the year when political-status protests commenced. The relationship between the GAA and political prisoners will be explored in the wider context of how the GAA reacted to the outbreak and early years of the 'Troubles'.

Throughout the period 1969-1976 the relationship between the GAA and political prisoners was similar to that which had existed during previous republican campaigns and this again manifested itself in three different ways. First, the GAA raised funds for the dependents of those interned and imprisoned; second, the GAA publicly condemned internment and supported those interned, while also giving limited support, on humanitarian grounds, to the various republican prison protests; and, third, Gaelic games, with the support of the GAA, were

¹ Hassan, 'The GAA in Ulster', p. 87.

² Hassan, 'The GAA in Ulster', p. 87.

³ Kieran McEvoy, *Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland, Resistance, Management and Release* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 212.

played in Long Kesh as a symbolic act of republican resistance. While exploring each of these in turn, this chapter will assess the discussions that took place within the GAA as to the appropriate response of the association to the 'Troubles' generally and political prisoners in particular. It will ask whether the responses varied across time and according to place. It will explore how the GAA of the late 1960s and 1970s, formed by its tradition, self-image and nationalist rhetoric, confronted the complex and evolving realities of contemporary politics.

I.

Throughout the period 1969-1976, the GAA raised funds which were used for a variety of 'Troubles' related purposes. In late 1969, and throughout 1970, the funds were focused on helping those who had crossed the border to escape the conflict and were housed in Irish Army camps,⁴ and in helping to rebuild houses⁵ that had been burned down during the 'Belfast pogroms'.⁶ Following the re-introduction of internment in Northern Ireland, in August 1971, the funds were diverted to support the internees and their families. In his report to the 1972 Annual Congress, held in April 1972, Seán Ó Síocháin, General Secretary, wrote that the GAA identified itself with the 'National Cause...mainly through providing the essential week-to-week financial help for the wives and children left without the breadwinner',⁷ with Pat Fanning (Pádraig Ó Fainín), GAA president, adding that the association could be 'particularly proud of the manner in which it moved to meet the distress and hardship that was the inevitable consequence of internment and other repressive measures'.⁸ As late as March 1975, Donal Keenan (Donal Ó Cianáin), GAA president, stated that fundraising 'will continue for a long time to come' and called on GAA members to ensure 'that there is a sufficient amount of money at central level to give to those...women and children whose menfolk are still incarcerated and may be for a long time to come'.⁹

During this period, 1969-1976, a number of different fundraising ventures were initiated by the GAA, with varying results. The accounts of the association provide very limited information on the specific amounts raised but information contained within the GAA annual reports and meeting minutes give an indication of the methodologies and amounts raised. When

⁴ Executive Committee minutes, September-October 1969, CCMB 1969, pp. 206, 216 & 232.

⁵ 1970 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1970, p. 63.

⁶ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army, The IRA 1916-1979* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press Limited, 1989), p. 365.

⁷ Report to 1972 Annual Congress, Bound Volume collecting GAA Congress Booklets 1962-1972, p. 750.

⁸ 1972 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1972, p. 87.

⁹ 1975 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1975, pp. 79-80.

the 'Troubles' broke out fundraising was conducted at county board level¹⁰ which proved a considerable success; at the 1970 Annual Congress it was reported that £48,000 had been collected and 'distributed to two centres in Belfast, one being the principal rehabilitation centre in Belfast and the other the Bombay Reconstruction'¹¹ with a sum of money remaining 'for emergencies, whether they are in Derry or Belfast.'¹² In September 1971, it was decided that a full day, 3 October 1971, would be dedicated to 'Northern Relief', but the poor returns from this, £4,932,¹³ prompted the GAA to ask each county board to organise a church-gate collection for 5 December 1971,¹⁴ later changed to 2 January 1972. A press release emphasised that the 'money collected will be channelled by the Central Council to the County Committees of the affected areas, for disbursement by accredited relief organisations, whose bona fides are above reproach' and that the 'fund will apply solely to relieving the financial difficulties of families left without the support of the breadwinner because of internment, or for any other reason arising from the present disturbances in the Six County area.'¹⁵ The press statement further detailed that the GAA had already contributed £15,000 'either directly or through the good offices of the Irish Red Cross' and that 'the average weekly totals paid out...are: Belfast £1,500, Derry £1,000, Lurgan and Armagh £500, with lesser amounts in other affected areas. The average weekly payment per family is £5.'¹⁶ This church-gate collection was also advertised in the GAA sections of the provincial and local newspapers, including the *Munster Express*,¹⁷ *Connacht Tribune*,¹⁸ *Leitrim Observer*¹⁹ and the *Kerryman*.²⁰ Reaction to this localised collection was positive with the Mayo²¹ and Galway²² county boards raising £2,000 and £3,000 respectively while Carrickmacross GAA (Monaghan), having raised £153, called it 'one of the largest sums ever collected at a church gate in the town.'²³ In February 1972, two weeks after Bloody Sunday when anti-British sentiment was high, the GAA Executive

¹⁰ Central Council minutes, 10 January 1970, CCMB 1970, p. 5.

¹¹ The Bombay Street Housing Association was a voluntary body established to rebuild the 44 houses burned down in August 1969; Peter Quinn (future GAA president) was the Association's accountant. 'Bombay Street, Belfast, Reconstruction Fund' *Anglo-Celt*, 2 October 1970, p. 13.

¹² 1970 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1970, p. 63.

¹³ Executive Committee minutes, 22 October 1971, CCMB 1971, p. 234.

¹⁴ Central Council minutes, 23 October 1971, CCMB 1971, p. 239.

¹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 30 December 1971.

¹⁶ *Irish Press*, 31 December 1971.

¹⁷ *Munster Express*, 31 December 1971.

¹⁸ *Connacht Tribune*, 31 December 1971.

¹⁹ *Leitrim Observer*, 1 January 1972.

²⁰ *Kerryman*, 1 January 1972.

²¹ *Connacht Tribune*, 11 February 1972.

²² *Connacht Tribune*, 21 January 1972.

²³ *Anglo-Celt*, 7 January 1972.

Committee requested that each club donate a minimum of £2 per week to the fund²⁴ with a further appeal issued at the 1972 Annual Congress for clubs to 'play their full part in helping alleviate distress caused by internment and other repressive measures.'²⁵ At this Annual Congress it was reported that 'the amount of money collected to date for the relief of distress is in excess of £60,000 - if the weekly contributions of the players and clubs in the 6 counties were added, the grand total, since last August, would be approximately £80,000.'²⁶ Seán Ó Siocháin further expressed his hope that a regular weekly or monthly subscription by players and members, through their clubs, would be established.²⁷

The 1972 Annual Congress was held at a time of great political change in Northern Ireland: following an upsurge in violence (in reaction to Bloody Sunday) the Stormont administration was suspended in March 1972, with the promise of 'a British Minister to rule in Belfast...[the] phasing out of internment and massive economic aid for the Six Counties'.²⁸ William Whitelaw was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in March 1972 and he began quickly the phased release of the internees, with the first men released in April. The release of the first batch of internees, approximately 100 men, was met with mixed reactions: the move was welcomed by the Dáil parties and Northern Ireland public representatives but dismissed by the Civil Rights Association and Sinn Féin, who called the releases 'a further effort to divide the civilian population from the Republican movement.'²⁹ It was also feared that the piecemeal releases would impact negatively on fundraising for the internees: John Feeney wrote in the *Irish Press* that those fundraising for the dependents of internees 'fear that there will be a huge drop in funds once the numbers interned begin to dwindle', adding that 'the need for money will be more pressing when the internees are released. They will all be unemployed and in many areas will remain so due to the suspicions of many employers and the lack of work available to Catholics.'³⁰

The phased release of internees continued throughout 1972: in June, there were 416 men interned,³¹ by August the number had dropped to 283³² while in December 242 men

²⁴ Executive Committee minutes, 18 February 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 25.

²⁵ 1972 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1972, p. 98.

²⁶ Report to 1972 Annual Congress, Bound Volume collecting GAA Congress Booklets 1962-1972, p. 750.

²⁷ *Munster Express*, 31 March 1972.

²⁸ *Ulster Herald*, 1 April 1972.

²⁹ *Irish Independent*, 8 April 1972.

³⁰ *Irish Press*, 8 April 1972.

³¹ *Irish Independent*, 8 June 1972.

³² *Irish Press*, 9 August 1972.

remained in Long Kesh.³³ Throughout 1972, the release of the internees was firmly linked to the ending of paramilitary violence.³⁴ In the lead up to the Official IRA (OIRA) and Provisional IRA (PIRA) 1972 ceasefires, both groups came under moral³⁵ and political³⁶ pressure to end their armed campaigns, with the release of all internees inextricably linked to a cessation of paramilitary hostilities.³⁷ Father Denis Faul³⁸ and Conor Cruise O'Brien, (Irish) Labour Party spokesman on Northern Ireland, went further and accused the IRA of wanting to keep the internees in Long Kesh 'in order to maintain the alienation of the Catholic community' and 'as a barrier preventing the elected representatives of the Catholic people, and especially the SDLP, from engaging in normal political activity.'³⁹ This created the perception that it was republican violence, and not British policy, keeping men interned in Long Kesh. Furthermore, the passing of the Detention of Terrorists (Northern Ireland) Order, in November 1972,⁴⁰ led Lord Windlesham, Minister of State for Northern Ireland, to declare that 'internment as such is now a thing of the past.'⁴¹ On the second anniversary of internment Hugh McKeown wrote in the *Irish Independent* that 'since the introduction of the interim custody order, the main hue and cry against internment seems to have died down. The media no longer devote much space or time to it, and many are under the mistaken impression that the detention of political prisoners has been toned down.'⁴²

Reflecting this decline in public interest toward internment, GAA fundraising for internees declined sharply throughout 1973 despite the fact that the number of internees rose throughout the year to reach 610 by December 1973.⁴³ (In total 1,000 people were sentenced or detained throughout 1973 bringing the total number of detainees to 2,500.⁴⁴) In February 1973 the Coiste Bainisti (Management Committee) of the GAA ruled that 'in view of the failure of the Association to arrange for a free Sunday in every County, it was decided that a percentage

³³ *Irish Press*, 8 December 1972.

³⁴ *Irish Independent*, 8 June 1972.

³⁵ *Irish Independent*, 3 April 1972.

³⁶ *Irish Independent*, 8 April 1972.

³⁷ *Irish Independent*, 22 April 1972.

³⁸ *Irish Press*, 24 April 1972.

³⁹ *Irish Press*, 24 May 1972.

⁴⁰ The Detention of Terrorists (Northern Ireland) Order permitted the Secretary of State to apply against any suspect an interim custody order for 28 days, at the end of which time his case has to be referred to one of the three Commissioners appointed by the British government. *Irish Independent*, 12 November 1972.

⁴¹ *Irish Independent*, 11 November 1972.

⁴² *Irish Independent*, 9 August 1973.

⁴³ *Ulster Herald*, 22 December 1973, p. 6.

⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 22 December 1973.

of all gates taken on one Sunday out of three be set aside for the Funds'⁴⁵ with the later addition that 'an increased charge of 5p would be made in each Province in July at their principal final - County Committees...to arrange for a similar collection.'⁴⁶ In October 1973 the GAA decided to hold another national church-gate collection – the press release issued stated that the GAA 'aided by a generous public have to date distributed over £70,000...and the fund was kept solvent during recent months through subventions to the tune of £8,000 taken from principal G.A.A. championship gates in all four provinces.'⁴⁷ In December 1973, Donal Keenan, GAA president, having received £7,562 from the October church-gate collection that was held in some of the counties only,⁴⁸ 'emphasised the grave need for funds and urged the remainder of the Counties to have the collection taken up.'⁴⁹

The phased release of internees resumed and continued throughout 1974 and 1975, with the releases firmly linked to the pattern of political violence. The Gardiner Report, published in January 1975, recommended the continuation of internment (and the ending of special-category-status for sentenced paramilitary prisoners) but by the third month of the 1975 PIRA ceasefire (February 1975 – January 1976), 230 internees had been released (leaving 346 in Long Kesh) including the last two 'original internees'⁵⁰ and the final eight women interned in Armagh Prison.⁵¹ GAA fundraising for internees during this two year period was limited. In 1973 the four provincial councils donated a total of £6,050 to the 'Northern Relief Fund' while in 1974 Ulster was the only provincial council who donated money, £500, to the fund.⁵² To put this two-year GAA total of £6,050 into context, £198,000 was distributed by the Green Cross Committee between July 1974 and July 1975.⁵³ On 5 December 1975 the last 47 internees were freed⁵⁴ and the policy of internment officially ended. By August 1976 the Coiste Bainistí declared their fund 'depleted' and, in addition to asking the county boards to embark on another collecting drive, decided to hold a raffle for colour television at the 1976 hurling and football finals.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 2 February 1973, CCMB 1973, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 23 June 1973, CCMB 1973, p. 193.

⁴⁷ *Anglo-Celt*, 5 October 1973.

⁴⁸ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 28 November 1973, CCMB 1973, p. 334.

⁴⁹ Central Council minutes, 8 December 1973, CCMB 1973, p. 340.

⁵⁰ *Irish Press*, 19 April 1975.

⁵¹ *Irish Press*, 29 April 1975.

⁵² Report to 1975 Annual Congress, Bound Volume collecting GAA Congress Booklets 1973-1976, p. 442.

⁵³ *Irish Press*, 1 July 1975.

⁵⁴ *Irish Press*, 6 December 1975.

⁵⁵ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 21 August 1976, CCMB 1976, p. 196.

GAA fundraising for internees and political prisoners was not confined to Ireland: there was a brief, and wholly unsuccessful, relationship between the GAA and Irish Northern Aid (Noraid) between 1970 and 1972. The outbreak of the 'Troubles' in Ireland politicised the GAA in America; reports and images of Civil Rights protestors being attacked, and the heavy-handed, nationalist-targeted, response of the security forces, angered sections of Irish-America and 'many quickly reconnected with what had been a largely dormant sense of Irishness, one that for some increasingly became characterised by an intense antipathy towards the Unionist establishment in Northern Ireland and the British presence there'.⁵⁶ The GAA, as one of the leading Irish organisations in America, became an outlet through which this politicised sense of Irishness was expressed.

From its inception, Noraid⁵⁷ looked to the GAA, and other Irish and Irish-American institutions, for support. The overlap in membership between the two organisations, and the support of John 'Kerry' O'Donnell, one of the most influential men in US GAA circles,⁵⁸ ensured that the GAA, and Gaelic Park in New York in particular, were at the forefront of Noraid activities. Since the first GAA county-team tour of America, by the Tipperary hurling team in 1926, GAA officials in America realised that tours of Irish teams, preferably the All-Ireland or National League champions, had the ability to draw much larger crowds and raise more revenue than local fundraising initiatives could ever achieve. It was to this end that Michael Flannery, on behalf of a 'Fund-raising Committee in New York', appeared at the 21 August 1971 GAA Executive Committee meeting, in Croke Park, and appealed that the Antrim football team, a 'symbolic choice' of teams,⁵⁹ be given permission to undertake a September fundraising tour of America. Flannery explained that the Committee in New York was supported by prominent businessmen, top trade union officials and newspaper executives and

⁵⁶ Paul Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States* (Dublin: University College Press, 2009), p. 186.

⁵⁷ Noraid was founded in New York in 1970 and quickly became the main support group for militant republicanism. The founding members of Noraid, Matthew Higgins, Michael Flannery, Jack McCarthy and John McGowan, were all 'Irish-born veterans of the revolutionary period, all anti-treatyites, all emigrated during the 1920s and all were prominent in the New York G.A.A. and Irish County Associations.' Brian Hanley, 'The Politics of Noraid', *Irish Political Studies* 19, (2007), p. 16.

⁵⁸ John O'Donnell was born in Kerry, emigrating to Montreal in 1918 before moving to New York. In 1935, against the backdrop of the Great Depression, O'Donnell bought his first saloon bar in 1935, adding four more to his portfolio throughout the next decade. O'Donnell's involvement in the GAA began in 1929 when he joined the Kerry football club as a player; he subsequently served in a number of administrative roles, including President of the New York GAA. O'Donnell is best known for raising the funds to secure a long-term lease (with O'Donnell as sole proprietor) to Innisfail Park (renamed Gaelic Park) in 1944. Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, p. 105.

⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 27 August 1971.

that he expected the tour to raise \$100,000.⁶⁰ The Executive Committee agreed to the tour, on the condition that all the funds collected 'be channelled through the Central Council...to ensure that the funds would be devoted exclusively for the relief of distress.'⁶¹ It was this condition that led to the cancellation of the tour: Flannery's fundraising committee refused to accept that the funds be channelled through the Central Council and the GAA subsequently refused Antrim permission to travel.⁶² This clearly highlights the concerns that the GAA held about the disbursement of Noraid funds in Ireland; during the tumultuous opening years of the 'Troubles', Noraid (while later claiming to be a republican prisoner support group) openly raised funds for arms for the republican movement. This it often did in connection with GAA related events - in an article advertising a series of fundraising games in Gaelic Park, New York, in 1972, Matthew Higgins admitted that Noraid had no control over how the raised funds were spent in Ireland and stated that if the republican movement 'want they can spend it on weapons, but that is their concern.'⁶³

GAA tours to America had been cancelled in 1970, mainly due to the disruption the absence of players from Ireland was having on the Irish club competitions. When the GAA decided to resume these tours, in 1972, they scheduled that Derry would play the National Football League Winners (or runners-up) and Limerick would play the National Hurling League winners (or runners-up), in Gaelic Park (New York) in June 1972, and that the proceeds would 'go towards the Relief of Distress in the 6 Counties after the present overdraft on the International Fund (£4,000) has been cleared.'⁶⁴ However, eventual winners of the National Football League, Kerry, forfeited their June tour to New York when they accepted an invitation, from John Kerry O'Donnell, President of the New York GAA Board, to participate in the Cardinal Cushing games, in Gaelic Park in May. In addition to the Cardinal Cushing games, Kerry arranged to play games in Hartford and Boston with the 'proceeds of the latter fixture to be donated for the relief of distress in Northern Ireland'⁶⁵ with the funds spent on bringing 'groups of children from republican families in Northern Ireland to holiday in the Irish Republic.'⁶⁶ A revised tour timetable for the June New York games was drawn up⁶⁷ which

⁶⁰ Executive Committee minutes, 21 August 1971, CCMB 1971, p. 181.

⁶¹ Executive Committee minutes, 21 August 1971, CCMB 1971, p. 181.

⁶² *Irish Times*, 30 August 1971.

⁶³ Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, p. 190.

⁶⁴ Executive Committee minutes, 25 March 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 45.

⁶⁵ *Irish Times*, 18 April 1972.

⁶⁶ Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, p. 189.

⁶⁷ Executive Committee minutes, 12 May 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 129.

eventually scheduled Derry (football) travelling to New York in June⁶⁸ with a further programme of games planned for Gaelic Park in September including a Cork v Limerick hurling match and “An Irish County” v New York Football game on 10 September 1972. Pat Fanning, GAA president, outlined that ‘Labour Unions [are] being organised to support the event for Relief of Distress in the North and V.I.P.s such as Ted Kennedy [are] being invited’.⁶⁹ This trip was cancelled⁷⁰ when the GAA in New York informed the Executive Committee in Ireland that Gaelic Park would not be available on 10 September as it had been ‘reserved for a local programme to raise funds for relief of distress in Northern Ireland.’⁷¹ When the GAA in New York later wrote to state that Gaelic Park would, in fact, be available on 10 September the Executive Committee re-affirmed their decision to cancel the tour ‘because of the short notice and the many uncertainties connected with the proposed tour.’⁷²

This cancelled 1972 tour marked the end of the very brief relationship between the GAA (in Ireland) and Noraid. Irish republican violence throughout 1972 saw support levels for Noraid fall in America,⁷³ and in October 1972 Desmond O’Malley, Irish Minister for Justice, appealed to Irish-Americans not to contribute to Noraid. His message, carried on the front page of the *Irish Times*, would have been heard by GAA members throughout Ireland. In his appeal, O’Malley stated that money collected by Noraid ‘is finding its way into the hands of the I.R.A. and is being used to finance their campaign of violence.’ He asked that people contribute to the Red Cross or their Church instead.⁷⁴

II.

Throughout the period 1969-1976, the GAA publicly condemned internment and supported those interned, while also giving limited support, on humanitarian grounds, to the various republican prison protests. The GAA also campaigned directly on behalf of two republican prisoners, Donal Whelan and Desmond Ferguson, both of whom were former GAA players. The GAA voiced its concerns, internally, about internment as soon as the measure was proposed by the Irish government. On 5 December 1970, the Irish government threatened to reintroduce internment without trial due to a ‘secret armed conspiracy...to kidnap one or more

⁶⁸ *Irish Times*, 12 June 1972.

⁶⁹ Executive Committee minutes, 14 July 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 141.

⁷⁰ Executive Committee minutes, 28 July 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 157.

⁷¹ *Irish Times*, 4 August 1972.

⁷² Executive Committee minutes 11 August 1972, CCMB 1972, p. 163.

⁷³ Hanley, ‘The Politics of Noraid’, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Irish Times*, 25 October 1972.

prominent persons...with...plans to carry out armed bank robberies'.⁷⁵ The prospect of internment in the Republic of Ireland immediately led to public fears that internment would also be introduced in Northern Ireland, claims which were initially denied by the British Government.⁷⁶ The Central Council of the GAA suspended their 11 December meeting to discuss internment 'in both parts of the country' and drafted a statement 'expressing concern regarding the matter', but agreed that Sean Ó Síocháin would contact An Taoiseach, Jack Lynch,⁷⁷ before publishing the statement.⁷⁸ At their next meeting, the Central Council unanimously agreed not to publish the statement as 'the concern of the Council had been conveyed to the Taoiseach'.⁷⁹

When internment was introduced in Northern Ireland, on 9 August 1971, there was a 'general but not universal condemnation in the Republic...[ranging] from outright condemnation to a Fine Gael call for international supervision of the exercise of the emergency powers.'⁸⁰ The GAA, at all levels, condemned the introduction of internment: Pat Fanning, GAA president, was one of a number of speakers at an anti-internment rally held in Casement Park, Belfast, on 12 September 1971.⁸¹ The following April, at the 1972 Annual Congress, Fanning was unequivocal in his condemnation of internment and support for the internees, interned GAA members in particular. When addressing Congress, Fanning stated that GAA clubs had 'suffered through the crime of internment' before commenting

At this Congress today there are empty chairs. They were the chairs of men who were appointed to attend as County delegates. They are not with us because they are interned in British concentration camps. Their seats are left vacant as a symbol and as a tribute. These men are in the G.A.A. tradition. I send them greetings in your name. In your name I salute them.⁸²

One of those missing from the 1972 Annual Congress was Patrick J. McClean, vice-president of the West Tyrone GAA Board, who, in January 1972, although interned in Long Kesh, was chosen by the Tyrone county board to represent the county at both the Ulster

⁷⁵ *Irish Times*, 5 December 1970.

⁷⁶ *Irish Times*, 7 December 1970.

⁷⁷ Jack Lynch is the 'ultimate example of one who enjoyed success in the GAA and in politics'; Lynch won six All-Ireland senior medals in a row between 1941 and 1946, five in hurling and one in football. As his GAA career ended, Lynch stood and won a seat for Fianna Fáil in the 1948 election, he was promoted through the ranks and served in various ministerial positions, before being elected Taoiseach in 1966. Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan and Paul Rouse, *The GAA A People's History* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2009), pp. 163-166.

⁷⁸ Central Council minutes, 11 December 1970, CCMB 1970, p. 285.

⁷⁹ Central Council minutes, 19 December 1970, CCMB 1970, p. 287.

⁸⁰ *Irish Times*, 10 August 1971.

⁸¹ Cronin, Duncan & Rouse, *The GAA A People's History*, p. 167.

⁸² 1972 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1972, pp. 86-87.

Convention, in March 1972, and the 1972 Annual Congress.⁸³ In his report to the 1972 Tyrone County Convention, the secretary, Pádraig O'Neill, stated that the work of the GAA 'has been hampered and disrupted by the arrest, detention and unlawful internment of our members, officials, players and club members' but that it represented an opportunity for the 'Gaels of Tyrone...[to]...stress our solidarity with those who have been unjustly and unlawfully imprisoned or are suffering in other ways for the right to live and work as free men in their own country.'⁸⁴ Some units, however, were unsure and somewhat reluctant as to how to respond to internment: when representatives of Parnells and Fingallians contacted the Dublin county board to protest against internment, the county chairman, James Gray (Seamus De Grae), stated that 'this was a very delicate matter and [given] the fact that efforts were being made by the Chairmen of the county boards in the 6 Counties he thought it better not to pursue the matter.'⁸⁵ Throughout this condemnation the GAA sought to maintain its non-political stance: when five internees, GAA members from Down, criticised Tony Williamson, chairman of the South Down GAA Board, for running as an Alliance Party candidate for Newry and Mourne Council in the 1973 Northern Ireland local government elections, Sean Ó Síocháin issued a brief statement that 'the right of the individual member to pursue his political beliefs, removed from his G.A.A. activities and connection is basic and absolute.'⁸⁶

When internment officially ended, on 5 December 1975, the GAA, through Annual Congress, highlighted, and demanded an end to, 'internment by remand' whereby men were arrested and held, without charge, for up to twelve months; at the end of this period they would be brought to court where no charges would be brought against them.⁸⁷ In addition, the GAA, between 1969 and 1976, voiced its concerns for the welfare of sentenced republican prisoners. At the 1972 Annual Congress a London motion 'That the G.A.A. make a protest at the treatment of Irish political prisoners'⁸⁸ was passed, with another London motion passed in 1974 'That the G.A.A. does its utmost to ensure that members of the Association in British jails be given fair and humane treatment.' Responding to this motion, Donal Keenan, GAA president, stated that the GAA had previously made representations about the treatment and detention of prisoners in British jails and that the association 'would do their utmost to get fair and humane

⁸³ *Irish Times*, 20 January 1972.

⁸⁴ Secretary's Report to the 1972 Tyrone County Convention, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Dublin County Board minutes, 30 August 1971, Dublin County Board Minute Book 1966-1980, p. 372.

⁸⁶ *Irish Press*, 24 May 1973.

⁸⁷ 1976 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1976, pp. 86-87.

⁸⁸ 1972 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1972, p. 98.

treatment for all the people in British jails.’⁸⁹ Similarly, in February 1975, the Coiste Bainistí ‘decided to appeal to the Minister for Justice to ease the plight of the prisoners in Portlaoise Jail and, thereby, create a better climate towards a permanent peace.’⁹⁰

Republican prisoners initiated a number of hunger strikes during the period 1969-1976, with the GAA offering limited support to a small number of these protests. The GAA did not offer any support to the Billy McKee led 1972 hunger strike that resulted in republican prisoners being transferred to Long Kesh and being granted ‘special-category-status’. When PIRA prisoners in English jails mounted a series of hunger strikes, between 1973 and 1976, demanding repatriation to Long Kesh and Armagh prisons, where they would be afforded *de facto* political status,⁹¹ the GAA gave limited support to the prisoners’ demands. A public campaign was mounted on behalf of the prisoners, the Price sisters in particular, with detailed descriptions and public demonstrations of force-feeding crucial in building support for the prisoners.⁹² In January 1974, the Armagh GAA convention passed a resolution calling for the Price sisters to be allowed to serve their prison sentences in Ireland and sent copies of this resolution to every county board in Ireland asking for their support.⁹³ Other county boards passed similar resolutions at their own conventions including Tyrone,⁹⁴ Derry,⁹⁵ Dublin,⁹⁶ Mayo,⁹⁷ Cavan and Leitrim.⁹⁸ In March 1974 the Ulster Provincial Council also passed a resolution in support of the sisters,⁹⁹ while the Central Council ‘agreed that a letter be sent to the Minister for External Affairs in support of the Price Sisters transfer back to Ireland.’¹⁰⁰ The limits of the association’s support for the prisoners is evident in that there was no condemnation, or expression of sympathy, at national level, when Michael Gaughan (3 June 1974) and Frank Stagg (12 February 1976) died on separate hunger strikes.

During the period 1969-1976, the GAA campaigned on behalf of two individual prisoners, both former players. In 1973 Donal Whelan (Domhnall Ó Faolain), an All-Ireland

⁸⁹ 1974 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1974, p. 88.

⁹⁰ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 1 February 1975, CCMB 1975, p. 12.

⁹¹ Ruán O’Donnell, *Special Category. The IRA in English Prisons Volume 1: 1968-1978* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), pp. 177-179.

⁹² McEvoy, *Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland*, p. 81.

⁹³ *Irish Independent*, 21 January 1974.

⁹⁴ *Ulster Herald*, 2 February 1974.

⁹⁵ *Ulster Herald*, 9 February 1974.

⁹⁶ Dublin County Board minutes, 4 February 1974, Dublin County Board Minute Book 1966-1980, p. 427.

⁹⁷ *Connacht Telegraph*, 31 January 1974.

⁹⁸ *Anglo-Celt*, 1 February 1974.

⁹⁹ *Anglo-Celt*, 8 March 1974.

¹⁰⁰ Central Council minutes, 16 March 1974, CCMB 1974, p. 37.

hurling winner with Waterford in 1959, was removed from his post as headmaster of Kilmachthomas Vocational School.¹⁰¹ Whelan had received a two years suspended sentence for his role in the *Claudia* gun-running affair.¹⁰² Support for the reinstatement of Whelan was expressed at county, provincial and national levels, with the Central Council making representations on the matter to the Irish Government. At the 1974 Annual Congress, a Waterford sponsored motion was passed, insisting that ‘Ard-Chomhairle strive by every means available to it, for the reinstatement in his post of Domhnall Ó Faolain.’¹⁰³ In discussing the motion, Tommy Lynch (Tomás Ó Loingsigh), Armagh delegate, stated that ‘in the North they are used to injustices of all kinds, it happens daily. But even in their darkest days if a schoolteacher was imprisoned his job was there for him when he came out.’¹⁰⁴ Responding to the motion, Donal Keenan assured Congress that the GAA had made ‘strong representations’ to have Whelan reinstated and spoke of an unspecified plan (that Whelan had agreed to) and urged Congress not to take further action until ‘such time as they report back to the Central Council their success or failure in these negotiations.’¹⁰⁵ The lack of progress in these negotiations is evident: at the 1975 Annual Congress a similar motion was proposed¹⁰⁶ with the proposer, John Murphy, stating that the government was non-committal in previous negotiations on the matter.¹⁰⁷ (In August 1980, Donal Whelan was reinstated as the headmaster of Kilmachthomas Vocational School; when the post was advertised Whelan was the only applicant – the Waterford Vocational Education Committee recommended him for the post, with the Minister for Education approving it.¹⁰⁸)

The Offences against the State (Amendment) Act was passed in Ireland in 1972. Central to the Act was a provision that the ‘mere unsupported statement of a Chief Superintendent of the Garda Síochána would be accepted as evidence that an accused person was a member of an unlawful association.’¹⁰⁹ Desmond (Dessie) Ferguson (Deasún Mac Fheargusa), an All-Ireland football winner with Dublin in 1958 and 1963, was arrested and charged, in 1975, with membership of the Provisional IRA.¹¹⁰ During Ferguson’s trial, Chief Superintendent Richard

¹⁰¹ *Irish Times*, 18 September 1973.

¹⁰² *Irish Times*, 30 March 1973.

¹⁰³ 1974 Annual Congress Minutes, CCMB 1974, p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ 1974 Annual Congress Minutes, CCMB 1974, p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ 1974 Annual Congress Minutes, CCMB 1974, p. 70.

¹⁰⁶ 1975 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1975, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ *Irish Times*, 31 March 1975.

¹⁰⁸ *Andersonstown News*, 2 August 1980.

¹⁰⁹ *Irish Press*, 5 December 1972.

¹¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 21 July 1975.

Cotterell told the court that he believed Ferguson was a member of the IRA 'on the basis of confidential information' but Cotterell refused to disclose these reports to the defence counsel.¹¹¹ Ferguson's trial was a 'test-case' aimed at the Offences Against the State Act and 'although the Chief Superintendent involved refused repeatedly to answer questions as to the basis of his opinion, claiming "privilege"', Ferguson was convicted of membership of the Provisional IRA, 'solely on the basis of the Chief Superintendent's stated opinion.'¹¹² The Coiste Bainistí, at their July 1975 meeting, discussed Ferguson's prison sentence and decided to apply to the Governor of Portlaoise Prison for permission to visit Ferguson.¹¹³ The following month, James Gray, Dublin delegate, gave notice to the Leinster Council of Dublin county board's intentions to 'launch a protest in the event of Des Ferguson's employment being placed in jeopardy after the expiration of his current term of imprisonment.'¹¹⁴ In September 1975 the Coiste Bainistí reported that they had received resolutions of protest at Ferguson's imprisonment from Monaghan, Tipperary, Meath and Waterford but the Governor of Portlaoise had refused to allow representatives meet with Ferguson.¹¹⁵ At their November meeting, the Coiste Bainistí explained that the Minister for Justice had informed them that they were denied access to Ferguson as, in the Government's view, 'such a visit would be interpreted as condoning the serious illegality for which he was imprisoned.'¹¹⁶

III.

The period of internment at Long Kesh, 1969-1975, has been termed, by Kieran McEvoy, as one of 'reactive containment' through which 'levels of violence and violent perpetrators [were] contained while a political solution was sought.'¹¹⁷ Internees were initially held in Crumlin Road Prison, Magilligan Prison and, for a short period, the *Maidstone* prison ship, but the Long Kesh camp became the main holding centre for internees. Following a hunger strike led by Billy McKee, in Crumlin Road prison in 1972, republican convicts were transferred from Crumlin Road Prison to a separate section of Long Kesh and granted special-category-status, which amounted to *de facto* prisoner-of-war status.¹¹⁸ This meant that during

¹¹¹ *Irish Press*, 31 July 1975.

¹¹² *Sunday Independent*, 22 August 1976.

¹¹³ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 12 July 1975, CCMB 1975, p. 201.

¹¹⁴ Leinster Council minutes, 13 August 1975, Leinster Council Minute Book 1971-1975, p. 3328.

¹¹⁵ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 20 September 1975, CCMB 1975, pp. 211-212.

¹¹⁶ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 7 November 1975, CCMB 1975, p. 226.

¹¹⁷ McEvoy, *Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland*, p. 204.

¹¹⁸ Pádraig O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave, The Irish Hunger Strikes and the Politics of Despair* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), pp. 18-19.

the period 1969-1976 Long Kesh held several classes of detainees including republican internees, loyalist internees, sentenced republican prisoners (from both the Official and Provisional factions of the IRA) and sentenced loyalist prisoners. The Long Kesh camp was divided into three sections, with a total of twenty-two compounds, or cages as the republican internees and prisoners referred to them. Each cage contained up to four nissen huts that each accommodated up to eighty men.

Sport formed part of the everyday life of both the republican internees and convicts, but with some differences between the two types of prisoners. Within each cage there was a small tarmac playing pitch, more suited to five-a-side soccer, while within the overall camp, there were two football pitches, with soccer goalposts, known as the 'wee pitch' and the 'big pitch'. Internees and convicts were allowed access to these two pitches at regular intervals. Hurling was played by some of the republican internees, but, for security purposes, hurling was not allowed to be played by the republican convicts. For many republican internees, Long Kesh marked the first time that they played hurling – Joe Doherty, who was interned in Long Kesh in 1972, explained that, although he grew up a 'young Brit', supporting English and Northern Irish soccer teams, when he entered Long Kesh his 'whole life opened up' as it was there that he started learning the Irish language, studying Irish history and playing Gaelic games. Doherty explained that the first time he held a hurl, apart from when hurls were used for drilling purposes with Na Fianna Éireann, was in the internment cages of Long Kesh. Doherty explained that when he first entered Long Kesh as an internee,

I was in the cage that they had hurling sticks in...[so] I went out and did a wee bit of training there...It was only when I went into Long Kesh as an internee that we were taken out onto the pitch so that's when we were playing hurling. We used to learn it...we were certainly taken out on the field and learned how to hit the ball and catch the ball we did a wee bit of small training.

Hurling amongst the internees was played on an *ad hoc* basis and there was no real level of organisation attached to the sport. Doherty remembers that, whilst there were a few participants, there were not enough hurlers to play a match and that some of the internees 'basically did one or two hours out on the pitch once a week – somebody would just bring out the hurls, if somebody was there and he was a hurler he'd show you.'¹¹⁹ This is in contrast to the level of enthusiasm and organisation attached to the playing of Gaelic football amongst the internees, and the sentenced prisoners. Bobby Devlin, in his Long Kesh memoirs, *An Interlude*

¹¹⁹ Interview with Joe Doherty, Belfast, 28 February 2014.

with *Seagulls*, wrote of intense inter-cage Gaelic football competitions amongst the internees, often with medals presented to the winning cage.¹²⁰

Gaelic football was even more organised amongst the sentenced republican prisoners who, unlike the internees, were subject to the IRA's strict military regime.¹²¹ The sentenced prisoners also had the 'advantage' of knowing how long their sentence was and they could plan their prison lives accordingly, involving themselves in educational, cultural and sporting activities. (Many internees, who did not know for how long they would be held in Long Kesh, found it hard to motivate themselves and, as such, disengaged from the activities surrounding them.) By 1976, the sentenced PIRA prisoners occupied five cages - 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13. Within their respective cages, the prisoners played, on an almost daily basis, soccer, Gaelic football, baseball, volleyball and, when it snowed, rugby.¹²² For practical purposes, soccer was the most popular sport played within the cages, as when Gaelic football was played, the ball would regularly go over the fence and the prisoners would have to ask the prison guards to return the ball. When the weather was bad, the prisoners in Cage 11 often emptied the contents of the end hut, which acted as a meeting / canteen hut, and played three-a-side soccer in this hut.¹²³

The convicted republican prisoners were also allowed access to one of the 'wee' and 'big' football pitches 'three or four times a week', where they played soccer and Gaelic football, with 'a balance of matches played' and neither code outweighing the other. The prisoners organised an inter-cage Gaelic football league, with the inaugural competition taking place in 1976. Each of the five participating cages had a selection panel, usually three members, who would pick the team to play the cage's scheduled match. A cage not involved in a particular match would supply the referee and umpires for the match. The matches themselves were played according to regulation GAA rules, with the main differences being that the pitch was a gravel pitch and only contained soccer goal posts. (It is unclear if points were counted in these matches – Joe Doherty explained that points were not counted and it was goals only, while Liam Stone maintained that points were counted and that the umpire would have to adjudicate whether the ball went inside the imaginary points-posts.) Cage 10 won the inaugural inter-cage competition, with Cage 11 winning each subsequent competition until the cessation

¹²⁰ Bobby Devlin, *An Interlude with Seagulls: Memories of a Long Kesh Internee* (Belfast: Bobby Devlin, 1982).

¹²¹ David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), p. 22.

¹²² Interview with Liam Stone, Belfast, 28 February 2014.

¹²³ Interview with Liam Stone, Belfast, 28 February 2014.

of the league in 1983. Liam Stone, who was in Cage 10 in 1976 and transferred to Cage 11 in 1977, is in the unique position of being on each winning team in the history of the Long Kesh inter-cage Gaelic football competition. The phasing out of special-category-status from paramilitary prisoners, from 1 March 1976 onwards, had a detrimental effect on the organisation of the Gaelic football competitions, and sport in general, within the Long Kesh camp. Republican prisoners convicted of an offence after 1 March 1976 were sent to the newly constructed cellular H-Blocks; as special-category prisoners were released, and with no new entrants, the population of the Long Kesh camp dwindled. By 1978 there were only enough republican prisoners in Long Kesh to fill four cages – by 1980 there were only three cages. The decrease in prisoner population, and the reduction in the number of inhabited cages, had a detrimental impact on the competition and inter-cage rivalry

As with previous periods of republican detention, the GAA supported the playing of Gaelic games within Long Kesh by supplying clothing and equipment. The players in Long Kesh played the inter-cage leagues wearing full kits provided by some GAA clubs, with GAA clubs also providing the footballs. Members of the winning team received a medal or small shield, supplied by a GAA club, with the Jimmy Steele Memorial Trophy¹²⁴ presented to the winning team. The authorities in Long Kesh allowed the GAA to supply this material – at the 1976 GAA Annual Congress, the Armagh delegate complained that the Governor of Portlaoise Prison would not allow Armagh delegates deliver a set of jerseys to the republican prisoners and that ‘they had already delivered a set to Long Kesh and a set to Magilligan and there were no problems whatsoever.’¹²⁵

The playing of Gaelic games by both the internees and the special-category prisoners was a deliberate ideological act of defiance. Gaelic games were used as a weapon within the Long Kesh camp. Joe Doherty explained that, in addition to promoting the Irish language, history and music, the view amongst the internees was that ‘you certainly weren’t playing your full role, if you weren’t promoting Gaelic football.’ Liam Stone agreed and explained that the republican prisoners

wanted to show our defiance, show that notwithstanding the fact that we were in them circumstances, we were in that environment – that as conscious Irish republicans we were going to play games associated

¹²⁴ Jimmy Steele was an IRA man of the 1930s-1950s; he escaped from Crumlin Road Prison in 1943 and, while on the run, facilitated the escape of 21 prisoners from Derry Prison. The Jimmy Steele Memorial Trophy is currently used by the Golf Committee of the Roddy McCorley Society, Belfast.

¹²⁵ 1976 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1976, p. 87.

with Irish culture, our native games.... We were conscious that we were there as Irish republicans and we would be promoting our native games, even within the confines.¹²⁶

As Brian Hanley has shown, in 'Irish Republican attitudes to sport since 1921', the outbreak of the 'Troubles' changed much about republicanism in a cultural sense. Republicans in Belfast, Derry and other urban areas saw no contradiction in being members of the IRA and supporting English and Scottish soccer clubs.¹²⁷ This cultural shift was reflected in the Long Kesh camp where the prisoners played both Gaelic football and soccer. This was in stark contrast to previous bouts of republican internment and imprisonment, where the playing of 'foreign games' was a contentious issue amongst republican prisoners. Only a decade previously, the proposed inclusion of soccer in the feis organised by the republican prisoners in Belfast Jail, imprisoned as part of the 'Border Campaign' (1956-1962), led to a serious argument amongst the prisoners.¹²⁸

IV.

The response of the GAA to the introduction of internment, and the imprisonment of republicans, has to be placed in the context of the association's overall response to the early years of the 'Troubles'. While the ban on 'foreign games' was rescinded by the GAA in 1971, the ban on members of the British military becoming members of the GAA remained. The people most instrumental in having the ban on foreign games removed, Tom Woulfe and John O'Grady in particular, focused their attentions on attempting to remove the ban on the British military and, as shall be discussed in the following chapters, became the most vocal opponents of any GAA involvement in the H-Blocks campaign.

In many ways, the response of the GAA to the outbreak of the 'Troubles' mirrors that of the response of society in the Republic of Ireland. Diarmaid Ferriter, in *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s*, has shown that while the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland forced people in the Republic of Ireland to 'think seriously about the border for the first time in decades' there was also a 'concerted political determination to ensure that the Troubles were contained in Northern Ireland and would not spill over the border.'¹²⁹ While Bloody Sunday was a seminal moment in the history of Ireland, the resultant anger, protests and calls for a United Ireland in

¹²⁶ Interview with Liam Stone, Belfast, 28 February 2014.

¹²⁷ Brian Hanley, 'Irish Republican attitudes to sport since 1921' in McAnallen, Hassan & Hegarty (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA Ulaidh*, pp. 175-184.

¹²⁸ Bryson, (ed.), *The Insider*, p. 413.

¹²⁹ Diarmaid Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2012), p. 121.

the Republic were reactionary and short lived, with John A. Murphy later writing that IRA violence had ‘numbed’ the ‘so-called aspiration to a united Ireland’ by 1976. (By 1976, 1,794 people had been killed in the ‘Troubles’.) Several declarations of support for the ‘struggle for freedom’ were expressed by the GAA at their 1972 Annual Congress, held two months after Bloody Sunday. In his report to this Congress, Seán Ó Síocháin wrote that the GAA identified itself with ‘the National cause in the struggle for civil rights and liberty in the Six Counties’, while at the Congress itself a Cork motion was unanimously passed that the GAA supports ‘the people of the North of Ireland in their struggle for freedom.’ Also at this Congress, an Antrim motion sought to amend Rule 7 of the GAA’s rulebook, which stated that the GAA was a non-political association, to include that ‘active support be given to the struggle in the North for National Unity.’ While this motion was not passed, presumably on a technicality, the minutes record that Congress ‘agreed with [the] spirit of [the] motion’, with Pat Fanning, GAA president, explaining that the motion remained on the agenda ‘lest its removal...might lead anybody to the false conclusion that the Association was other than with the people of the North in their struggle.’¹³⁰ As the conflict continued, however, the GAA, rather than supporting the ‘struggle’ as a whole, focused instead on the specific issues of the British military occupations of GAA grounds, the treatment of political prisoners and support for internees. Between 1973 and 1976 no motions of support for the wider ‘national struggle’ were passed – while two motions to this effect were proposed in 1973 and 1976, both were withdrawn after discussion. There is no doubt, however, that a more general support for republicanism and Irish unity informed and guided many of those who agitated for the GAA to support the republican prisoners.

As with previous republican campaigns, the GAA showed its solidarity with internees and prisoners predominantly through fundraising. Against the backdrop of intensive violence, the GAA had to ensure that any support, financial or otherwise, it offered to the internees and prisoners could not be perceived as support for IRA violence. In previous campaigns the GAA donated money to external organisations including National Aid (1916), Irish Republican Prisoners Fund (1917), Green Cross Society (1941) and An Cumann Cabhrach (1959) but throughout the opening years of the ‘Troubles’, the GAA maintained full control over the disbursement of the funds it raised. This insistence on maintaining full control over the raised funds deprived the GAA of a potential \$100,000 when the association refused to allow the Antrim football team undertake a fundraising tour of America in September 1971. The reason

¹³⁰ 1972 Annual Congress Minutes, CCMB 1972, p. 98.

for stance this was clear though: GAA fundraising took place in the shadow of the 1970 'Arms Trial' when £76,000 of the Irish government's 1969 grant-in-aid for the relief of distress in Northern Ireland could not be accounted for, with two cabinet ministers removed from office for allegedly attempting to import arms to Northern Ireland with the funds. If any evidence was uncovered of GAA money being donated to republican paramilitary organisations, the repercussions for the association would have been severe, from the British and Irish governments, British military and, in particular, loyalist paramilitaries. Equally, post-1972, when the GAA expressed support for republican prisoners it was on humanitarian grounds only, with the association not expressing support for the actions or ideology that led to the prisoners being incarcerated. When the GAA raised the matter of prisoners in English jails and Portlaoise Prison their statements were carefully worded to reflect that their concerns were on humanitarian grounds only. On the two occasions the GAA directly campaigned for individual IRA prisoners, the association was, in fact, campaigning against the issues behind the sentences (return to employment and the Offences Against the State Act) rather than showing any support for the actions of the men or their paramilitary allegiance.

Chapter Two: 1976-1980

The January 1975 Gardiner Report recommended an end to special-category-status, a privilege won by republican hunger strikers in 1972, at the 'earliest practicable opportunity' and that politically motivated prisoners should be detained in a separate prison. Almost immediately, in February 1975,¹ construction on what became known as the 'H-Blocks' commenced. This new prison complex, officially titled 'HMP Maze' but called Long Kesh by republicans, consisted of eight 'H' shaped cellular prison structures which, according to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), provided 'prison accommodation on a par with the best in Western Europe.'² In November 1975, Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, announced that special-category-status was to be phased out. This announcement triggered what became known as the 'Prison War'³ - an ideological war between the British government and paramilitary prisoners, Provisional IRA prisoners in particular. Under the new scheme announced by Rees, any paramilitary prisoner sentenced for an offence committed after 1 March 1976 was to be denied special-category-status and treated as an ordinary prisoner. (This was amended in April 1980 so that any prisoner sentenced after 1980, no matter when the offence was committed, was not afforded special-category-status). The acceptance of criminal status was anathema to the republican movement for a number of reasons, predominantly the implied criminalisation of their armed campaign. Criminalisation would have had important propaganda implications for the republican movement and they considered it an ideological challenge to their position. Beginning with Kieran Nugent, the first republican prisoner sentenced for an offence committed after 1 March 1976, the republican prisoners undertook a series of escalating protests that culminated in the 1980 and 1981 H-Block hunger strikes. Outside of the prison, a limited protest campaign was initiated by both Sinn Féin and the semi-autonomous Relatives Action Committees, but it was not until the formation of the National H-Block Committee, in October 1979, that these protests had a meaningful impact upon public opinion outside of the republican communities.

This chapter will address how the GAA reacted to the escalating campaign that took place between 1976 and 1980, with an examination of the early relationship between the GAA and the National H-Block Committee. The reaction of the GAA to the 1980 hunger strike will

¹ *Irish Times*, 6 February 1975.

² *H-Blocks The Facts* (Northern Ireland Office, 1980), p. 2.

³ Richard English, *Armed Struggle The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Books, 2004), pp. 187-226.

be explored, in the context of the public dispute that arose between the GAA and the Garda Representative Association (GRA) over the association's alleged ambivalence to republican violence. Finally, this chapter will analyse the proceedings of the county and provincial conventions that took place shortly after the conclusion of the 1980 hunger strike, in an attempt to ascertain if the response of GAA units to the hunger strike, and associated matters, varied according to time, place and external factors, in particular the killing of three Gardaí at the outset of the hunger strike.

I.

While there were some street protests in support of the H-Block prisoners during the period between the removal of special-category-status (March 1976) and the formation of the National H-Block Committee (October 1979), these protests were not part of a structured and co-ordinated campaign. Throughout this three year period, protests were staged by Sinn Féin, the Relatives Action Committees (RACs),⁴ and various other republican-socialist groupings. On occasions, the H-Block marches held by one group were boycotted by another: when a socialist-republican H-Blocks march was held in Burntollet in January 1979, it was supported by the RACs but boycotted by Sinn Féin who condemned the organisers for applying to the RUC for permission to hold the march.⁵ This section will detail the GAA's involvement in these protests and, furthermore, it will investigate the affect these protests had on the GAA. The involvement of the GAA in these protests must be discussed in the context of Rule 7 of the GAA's rulebook, which, until March 1979, stated that the GAA was a 'non-political and non-sectarian' association, with units and representatives prohibited from participating 'in any political movement.'

The GAA's first involvement in the prison protests of this period came about due to a protest in support of a 1977 IRA hunger strike in Portlaoise prison, rather than the H-Blocks, but the incident served as a warning to the association about the level of emotion attached to republican hunger strikes and their potential to split opinion within the GAA.

⁴ The Relatives' Action Committees (RACs) consisted of families, friends and community members of the prisoners; their aim was to publicise the plight of the protesting prisoners. While heavily influenced by Sinn Féin, the RACs stressed their political autonomy in an attempt to widen their support. In August 1978 a Central Coordinating Committee was established to coordinate the activities of these committees. Ross, *Smashing H-Block*.

⁵ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 53.

In March 1977 approximately 100 republican prisoners went on hunger strike at Portlaoise prison with a series of demands.⁶ At the GAA's 1977 Annual Congress, which was held six days after a 3 April public protest in Portlaoise in support of the prisoners ended in violence,⁷ a Kerry motion proposed 'That anxiety be expressed and concern of the [sic] inhuman treatment of political prisoners in Portlaoise and other jails in this country and in England.' In proposing the motion, Gerald McKenna, Kerry Chairman, explained that he did not allow any major discussion when the motion was raised at the Kerry county convention, but he felt that 'as an Association they had the right to express anxiety and concern on the humanitarian basis of fellow human beings and that they would never be afraid or ashamed to do that'. Con Murphy⁸ (Conchur Ó Murchú), GAA president, addressed Congress and stated that 'the Association in every part of Ireland acts with great responsibility, great calm, great cohesion and, at the same time, great determination that there would be justice for all' and 'with a full sense of the Association's responsibility to society and its place in the community...he urged the powers that be, at home and abroad, to allay any fears of disquiet regarding the humane treatment of prisoners.' Delegates accepted Murphy's statement as 'expressing the feelings of all members of Congress' and the Kerry motion was not put to the delegates for acceptance or rejection.⁹

On the weekend of 16-17 April, there were further protests in Dublin with the protestors trying to capitalise on the 43,500 people attending the National Football League final between Dublin and Kerry at Croke Park on Sunday, 17 April. Before the start of this match, protestors carrying banners in support of the Portlaoise hunger strikers entered the pitch but they were quickly removed by Gardaí, who were 'vigorously helped by two of the Dublin players, John McCarthy and David Hickey [who] chased, tackled and held the young men', resulting in the arrest of six protestors.¹⁰ Dublin, as reigning All-Ireland football champions, were scheduled to accompany Cork (All-Ireland hurling champions) and the football and hurling All-Stars

⁶ The *Irish Times* listed the demands of the prisoners as 'the right to free association; an end to degrading and humiliating strip searches; an end to solitary confinement; open visits; the right to engage in craft work; the right to educational facilities; adequate recreation and exercise facilities; the right to communicate with the legal adviser of their choice and an end to brutality. *Irish Times*, 26 March 1977.

⁷ *Irish Times*, 4 April 1977.

⁸ Con Murphy, who was GAA president during 1976-1979, was republican in outlook but, according to Liam Mulvihill, never allowed his politics to interfere in his GAA presidential duties.

⁹ 1977 Annual Congress Minutes, CCMB 1977, p. 107.

¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 18 April 1977.

teams on an 18-day tour of America, in May 1977, visiting Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York.

The seemingly minor Croke Park incursion took on significance when, on 20 April, Tom O'Donoghue, Chairman of the North American Board of the GAA, issued a statement that his board was opposed to Hickey and McCarthy participating in any of the games within the North American Board's jurisdiction. O'Donoghue claimed that Irish-Americans, GAA members in particular, were 'shocked and outraged' at photographs that appeared in newspapers showing Hickey and McCarthy 'violently attacking persons pleading for mercy for the hunger-strikers at Portlaoise Prison'. O'Donoghue accused Hickey and McCarthy of '[disgracing] the uniform of the Dublin team and the spirit of the G.A.A. by using Croke Park to violently express their political hostility to the hunger-strikers.'¹¹ The situation escalated the following day, 21 April, when the New York Board (a separate entity from the North American Board) issued their own statement that, while denying the imposition of a ban on any members scheduled to travel to America, insisted that in the 'interests of safety and preserving the harmony of this great Irish occasion' it would be 'inadvisable' for Hickey and McCarthy to play in New York.¹² John 'Kerry' O'Donnell, owner of Gaelic Park, New York, also informed the *Irish Times* that 'in his opinion, the players would be "ill-advised" to appear at the New York venue.'¹³ This statement was, however, repudiated by Terry Connaughton, a former President of the New York Board, who urged the Dublin team to 'ignore any statements from John 'Kerry' O'Donnell', adding that the New York GAA was 'not up in arms over what happened in Croke Park...as John Kerry O'Donnell would like people at home to believe.'¹⁴

In Dublin there was widespread anger at the imposition of a 'ban' on the two players; this anger was particularly focused at Fr. Sean McManus, the founding member of the Irish National Caucus¹⁵ – the body influential in having the GAA 'ban' on McCarthy and Hickey imposed. While McCarthy had withdrawn from the tour for personal reasons, Hickey signalled his intentions to participate in the tour stating that 'Fr McManus had no jurisdiction over the team picked by Dublin.'¹⁶

¹¹ Central Council Officers Committee minutes, 22 April 1977, CCMB 1977, p. 126.

¹² Central Council Officers Committee minutes, 22 April 1977, CCMB 1977, p. 126.

¹³ *Irish Times*, 21 April 1977.

¹⁴ *Irish Independent*, 22 April 1977.

¹⁵ Father Sean McManus, a vocal supporter of the IRA, was born in Fermanagh but moved to the United States in 1972. In 1974, McManus founded the Irish National Caucus, an Irish-American lobby group that aimed to counterbalance the British influences in the United States government.

¹⁶ *Irish Press*, 21 April 1977.

The 'ban' and 'advice' from the two American boards was a direct challenge to the authority of the Central Council. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s the relationship between the GAA in Ireland and America, New York in particular, was strained, with Pat Fanning, GAA president between 1970 and 1973, describing the relationship between the Central Council and the New York Board as 'something of a sour joke over the past twenty years.'¹⁷ The demand that Hickey and McCarthy be excluded placed the Central Council in a dilemma: the Council could not be seen to be dictated to by any unit of the association but if protests against Hickey materialised in New York, or elsewhere, this could cause serious embarrassment to both the player and the GAA as an organisation. It was decided to hold a meeting of the officers of the Central Council, on 22 April, when the matter would be fully discussed and a statement issued. On the day of the meeting the scheduled tour was receiving widespread media coverage, featuring on the front pages of the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Irish Press*. Jack Lynch, the leader of the opposition, released a statement noting that he 'fully approved of the action taken' by Hickey and McCarthy and he had 'the fullest confidence in the leadership of the GAA that they will not allow themselves to be dictated to by any unit of the organisation...especially when the motivation comes from the Irish National Caucus'.¹⁸ At the meeting itself, the statements from the North American and New York boards were considered, as were the three additional statements issued by the Chicago Divisional Board, United Irish Societies San Francisco and the Irish Cultural Society Los Angeles, all of which pledged full support to the Central Council. Con Murphy, presented three options to the meeting – proceed with the tour as planned; cancel a city or cities; or cancel the tour in its entirety. The Central Council 'taking into consideration the numerous expressions of support and desire for strong action from many parts of Ireland' released a statement reaffirming its position as the 'governing body of the Association' and warned that it would 'not accept dictation in this or any other circumstances, from inside or outside the Association'. Further, it announced that the tour was to proceed as originally planned, with 'Hickey in the party.'¹⁹

This statement was released to the media and appeared in newspapers the following day, 23 April. The statement was, however, overshadowed by the news that the Portlaoise hunger strike had been called off without any apparent concessions to the prisoners.²⁰ The Irish

¹⁷ Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, p. 165.

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 22 April 1977.

¹⁹ Central Council Officers Committee minutes, 22 April 1977, CCMB 1977, p. 127.

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 23 April 1977.

National Caucus in America lifted their 'ban' on Hickey travelling²¹ and the North American Board then lifted their own 'ban'.²² The teams, including Hickey, left for America to fulfil the schedule; while a contingency plan to by-pass New York in the event of protests was made, reports from the four American venues were on the whole positive.²³

This very brief episode (the 'ban' on Hickey lasted only three days) highlighted how potentially divisive republican prison protests, and hunger strikes in particular, could be to the GAA. Although no real protests materialised, the 1977 incident showed how strong opinion in America could be and the potential internal strife this could generate. In justifying the initial stance of the North American Board, O'Donoghue later told the *Irish Times* that he was acting in the interests of the hunger strikers and that 'feelings among the Irish in America were running at fever-pitch as a result of the hunger-strike and the Croke Park incident...This situation wasn't properly realised in Ireland.'²⁴ While the significance of the situation may not have been 'properly realised' by the GAA in Ireland, Paddy Downey, *Irish Times* journalist, grasped the seriousness of the issue. In April 1977 he wrote that calling off the tour would have been a 'disaster' for the GAA and 'might well have split the GAA irreparably because of the highly emotive and delicate political issues involved.' While acknowledging the regular intrusion of politics upon sport in Ireland, Downey maintained that while the GAA was 'made up of diverse political opinions', the association, as a body, 'must be seen to observe its own rules - and one of those rules states very explicitly that the organisation is non-political and non-sectarian.' Downey recalled that the GAA survived the Parnell split and the Civil War and commented that 'having achieved those victories it would be ironic as well as tragic if it allowed the political issues of the moment - enormous though they be - to split its own ranks and destroy the great work that has been through most of a century.'²⁵

Two further incidents occurred during the following year, 1978, which again tested the GAA's observance of its 'non-political' rule. In July 1978, the Antrim county board allowed a Sinn Féin H-Block demonstration to take place in Casement Park, while in August 1978, the Derry county board cancelled fixtures to allow its members attend a H-Block demonstration. At the half-time interval of the Ulster Senior football semi-final, between Derry and Down, on 2 July, a loudspeaker van was driven around the perimeter of the Casement Park pitch

²¹ *Irish Independent*, 23 April 1977.

²² *Irish Press*, 23 April 1977.

²³ *Irish Press*, 23 May 1977.

²⁴ *Irish Times*, 30 April 1977.

²⁵ *Irish Times*, 22 April 1977.

requesting that the 8,000 spectators remained in the stadium after the game to attend a H-Block protest. Both the half-time address and the after-match demonstration had been approved by the Antrim county board. After the game 'about 500 supporters of the rally marched around the running track and stopped in front of the main ground stadium where speakers...addressed the crowd.'²⁶ While Sinn Féin denied that most GAA fans had left the ground before the protest, the Chairman of the Antrim county board, Mr. Rooney, reported to a 3 July County Committee meeting that 'people who left the ground early were verbally abused outside the ground with foul and filthy language. At the finish of the game the front gates were forcibly closed by a few individuals and kept closed for about 15 minutes before they were eventually opened to let the fans leave.'²⁷

The Derry county board cancelled all GAA fixtures scheduled for 27 August 1978 to allow its members to attend a Coalisland to Dungannon (Tyrone) march in support of the protesting H-Blocks prisoners. This march, held on the tenth anniversary of the first Civil Rights march, was organised by the Central Coordinating Committee of the Relatives' Action Committees and was attended by an estimated 25,000 people. The Derry county board was the only GAA board that cancelled fixtures in support of this protest. Patrick Mullan, Secretary of the county board, explained that the unanimous decision was taken on humanitarian grounds as 'many Derry GAA members are prisoners in H Block and relatives and friends wanted to go to the demonstration.'²⁸ However, the county board was accused by some of its own members of not adhering to the 'non-political and non-sectarian code' while, externally, the board was accused of 'pandering to the Provisional I.R.A.'²⁹ (The cancellation of fixtures in Derry would be mentioned in the 'Steering Group on the Civil Activities of Paramilitary Organisations' 1979 background paper on the GAA.³⁰)

The prison protests that followed the removal of special-category-status marked the beginning of the GAA's involvement in the 'prison-campaign' that lasted between 1976 and 1981. While internment had united all shades of nationalist opinion throughout Ireland, the

²⁶ *Irish Independent*, 3 July 1978.

²⁷ Antrim County Board minutes, 3 July 1978.

²⁸ *Irish Press*, 26 August 1978.

²⁹ *Irish Press*, 26 August 1978.

³⁰ In May 1979, at the request of the British Army, the Steering Group on the Civil Activities of Paramilitary Organisations (SG (CAPO)) produced a background paper on the GAA. This paper summarised the history of the GAA, its sources of funding and political affiliations. The report concluded that while some members of the GAA were sympathetic to (or involved in) paramilitary activity, the Association was a 'respectable national organisation' with 'no evidence to suggest a general involvement at any level by the GAA in terrorism or other paramilitary activity.' PRONI ENV/19/1/2A

protests within the H-Blocks, which were carried out by convicted paramilitary prisoners, were not universally supported by the nationalist community. This was particularly true within the GAA, where GAA involvement in the prison-campaign proved to be a very divisive issue. On the three occasions the GAA became involved in the prison campaign, between 1976 and 1978, the association was accused, by both those outside and within the association, of breaking its own 'non-political' rule. As shall be discussed below, this 'non-political' rule was amended in March 1979.

II.

The 1979 Annual Congress, held in Dublin on 24-25 March 1979, was a significant milestone in the history of the GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks prison protest campaign. At this Annual Congress, a motion was passed that changed the non-political rule of the GAA to a non-party-political rule, while another motion was passed that declared unequivocal support for the 'struggle' for 'National liberation'. The passing of these two motions was to have future repercussions for the GAA's involvement in the prison campaign and the association's relationship with the GRA. Furthermore, a two-part motion in support of the H-Block prisoners was passed at the Congress and the H-Blocks were included in Con Murphy's presidential address to Congress while, two days before the Congress, the GAA issued a statement on the H-Blocks.

The wording, and application, of the GAA's 'non-political' rule was debated at length by members of the GAA during the republican 'prison war'. The crux of this debate, raised at seven consecutive Annual Congress meetings (1978-1984 inclusive), was whether the association could involve itself in any political matters. The minority view was that the association could not comment or involve itself in any political matters whatsoever; the majority view was that the association could comment or become involved in issues of national significance, so long as these issues were not party-political. In 1978, Rule 7 of the Official Guide stated that the 'Association shall be non-political and non-sectarian. Political questions shall neither be raised nor discussed at its meetings. A Council, Committee, Club or representative thereof shall not take part as such in any political movement.'³¹ Having been withdrawn for re-drafting in 1978,³² a Longford sponsored motion amending Rule 7 to read 'The Association shall be non-party political....Party political questions shall neither be raised

³¹ GAA Official Guide (Treoraí Oifigiúil), 1978, p. 7.

³² 1978 Annual Congress Minutes Booklet, p. 40.

nor discussed... A Council, Committee, Club or representative thereof shall not take part as such in any party-political movement...' was passed at the 1979 Annual Congress.³³ This amendment to Rule 7 was opposed by one delegate, Tom Woulfe, the Dublin county board member who had led the campaign to abolish the ban on 'foreign games'. As neither the *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Independent* nor the *Irish Press* reported on this rule change, and as the minutes simply note that the motion was opposed by Woulfe, we are somewhat unsure as to Woulfe's motivation. While this rule change was to have serious consequences for the GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks campaign, the main motivation behind the change was the British Army occupation of GAA pitches, Saint Oliver Plunkett Park, Crossmaglen (Armagh) in particular. Liam Mulvihill (Liam Ó Maolmhichíl), Longford chairman at the time, explained that

we felt, and I was one of the main drivers behind this, that to say the GAA was non-political couldn't be defended at that time because there were so many issues that had come up – the H-Blocks was one of them but it was more to do with the British Army and the occupation of Crossmaglen...We felt that non-party-political was a better description...It had to be seen as political – that is political with a small 'p' – anything that was party-political was a capital 'P' and that was where the GAA should not go.³⁴

On 22 March, however, two days before the 1979 Annual Congress, the GAA released a statement that the 'conditions in H Block Long Kesh and the treatment of prisoners there is a cause of concern to the Gaelic Athletic Association which deplores violence and advocates decent standards and respect for fellow men.'³⁵ The statement added that the association, on humanitarian grounds, had been making efforts to get the British Authorities to 'find a solution to the problem' but that no progress was made. The statement further revealed that members of the association 'visited a prisoner, observed other prisoners...met concerned parents and relatives of the prisoners and other responsible well informed people' and concluded that 'there is no doubt but that the prisoners on protest are subject to indecent and inhumane treatment'.³⁶ Murphy, in his presidential address, made reference to this statement and added that the GAA 'strongly protest on humanitarian grounds and appeal to all with any responsibility, particularly to our Irish Government, to see that this treatment of prisoners by the British authorities in Ireland is stopped.' Later in the Congress, Murphy, in response to a two-part motion tabled by the Kerry and Fermanagh county boards seeking help and support for members of the GAA in

³³ 1979 Annual Congress Minutes Booklet, p. 20.

³⁴ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

³⁵ GAA News Release, 22 March 1979, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

³⁶ GAA News Release, 22 March 1979, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

the H-Blocks and condemning conditions in the prison, assured delegates that the GAA did not deliberately delay making their 22 March statement, but that ‘requests...were being put to them at the time not to make a statement for the time being’ and that Murphy believed the statement ‘should close the book.’³⁷ The two-part H-Block motion was subsequently passed by Congress.

Earlier in the Congress, a motion was passed that was to have ramifications for the association in their future dispute with the GRA. The wording of this Clare motion included the phrase that the GAA ‘be seen and heard through the National Media to unequivocally support the struggle for National liberation and the right to self-determination of the Irish people in the 32 counties without interference from foreign powers.’ In proposing this motion, B. O’Beachain admitted that ‘one could take several interpretations out of the motion’ and suggested that the words ‘struggle’ and ‘unequivocally’ be removed to leave a ‘very reasonable motion.’ Nevertheless, O’Beachain stated that the GAA’s ‘fundamental philosophy was that the freedom of the Irish historic nation to decide its own destiny without foreign interference was paramount’ and the motion was passed with no amendments.³⁸

The minutes for the 1979 Annual Congress record that the H-Blocks and ‘support for National liberation’ motions were both passed with no opposition from any delegates. As discussed, Tom Woulfe, who was to become a consistent critic of GAA involvement in the H-Blocks campaign, opposed the change to Rule 7 so it is somewhat surprising that he did not oppose either of these motions. These March 1979 developments, while of huge significance to the GAA’s involvement in the H-Blocks campaign, received little attention in the Irish media. The 22 March statement merited only a paragraph in the *Irish Independent*³⁹ and *Irish Press*.⁴⁰ The change to Rule 7 and passing of the H-Block motions were only mentioned in the *Irish Times*. Paddy Downey, writing in the *Irish Times* prior to Congress, warned that amending Rule 7 would be unwise,⁴¹ while, following Congress, the journalist Sean Kilfeather wrote an open letter, published in the *Irish Times*, to the new GAA president, Patrick McFlynn (Padraig MacFlionn), in which he sharply criticised the amendment to Rule 7 and the passing of a series of ‘Troubles’ related motions. Kilfeather also used his open letter to highlight the very thin interpretative line between ‘political’ and ‘party-political’. Kilfeather argued that the H-Blocks issue was a matter of dispute between the republican prisoners and the various British and

³⁷ GAA 1979 Annual Congress Minutes, p. 28.

³⁸ GAA 1979 Annual Congress Minutes, p. 27.

³⁹ *Irish Independent*, 23 March 1979.

⁴⁰ *Irish Press*, 23 March 1979.

⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 21 March 1979.

Northern Irish political parties, and, as such, ‘that makes the various motions passed on Saturday PARTY political motions and as such in breach of the rules even as amended.’ Kilfeather asked McFlynn, ‘Did you not feel that the silence on practically all of these motions on Saturday was a dangerous silence?’⁴²

The proceedings of the 1979 Annual Congress marked a real turning point in the GAA’s involvement in the H-Blocks campaign. The 22 March statement and the passing of the H-Blocks motions publicly announced that the GAA, at the highest level, was concerned about the conditions within the H-Blocks and, furthermore, association representatives, including the GAA president, had actively visited the H-Blocks and spoken to the relatives of prisoners. Of more importance, however, was the change to Rule 7. The amended rule now allowed units and representatives of the GAA to engage in the H-Blocks campaign which, while political in nature, was presented as a non-party political campaign. The timing of the change to Rule 7 was significant as it preceded the October 1979 formation of the National H-Block Committee, a non-party-political pressure group established to spearhead the H-Blocks campaign. As shall be discussed in the following section, the change to Rule 7 allowed the GAA to meet and develop a relationship with the new National H-Block Committee.

III.

Throughout 1978 the prison-protests were receiving little attention outside of the republican communities in Northern Ireland. In April 1978 the *Irish Times* reported that public support for the prisoners was ‘minimal’ with the biggest rallies for political status ‘only [attracting] a couple of thousand people.’⁴³ The first major breakthrough for the H-Blocks campaign came in August 1978, when Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich visited the H-Blocks and issued a statement comparing the conditions within the protesting blocks to the ‘slums of Calcutta’.⁴⁴ Following this, two key inter-connected events took place that affected both the prison-protest movement and the GAA; firstly, Sinn Féin, in 1979, decided to make a concerted political effort, through public protests, to win public support for the restoration of special-category-status while, secondly, in October 1979, the National H-Block Committee was formed. This section will focus on how the invigorated prison campaign affected the GAA and explore the relationship between the GAA and the National H-Block Committee.

⁴² *Irish Times*, 28 March 1979.

⁴³ *Irish Times*, 15 April 1978.

⁴⁴ Gerry Adams, *Hope and History Making Peace in Ireland* (Kerry: Mount Eagle Publications, 2003), p. 8.

In 1978, two years into the prison protest, Sinn Féin still ‘lacked a structured national political response to the prison crisis’ but at their 1978 Ard-Fheis, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh ‘signposted it as a priority for the movement.’⁴⁵ Beginning in 1979, the new republican newspaper, *An Phoblacht/Republican News*⁴⁶ gave widespread coverage to the issue, while Sinn Féin established a ‘POW Department’ to mobilise public opinion on the issue of political status, a H-Block Committee which focused on protesting prisoners in Northern Ireland jails, and a H-Block Information Service. By 1979, however, the republican prisoners were actively considering a hunger strike to coincide with the September visit of Pope John Paul II. The names of ten prisoners willing to undertake a hunger strike were sent to the IRA leadership but the prisoners were persuaded to give Sinn Féin ‘one last try at bringing about a settlement through protest action.’⁴⁷

One of these protests took place in Casement Park, Belfast, and had negative consequences for the GAA. On 12 August 1979, a Sinn Féin demonstration was held in Casement Park to mark the tenth anniversary of the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland. The issue of the H-Block prisoners featured prominently on the agenda. More than 6,000 people attended the demonstration, who, according to the *Irish Press*, ‘cheered rapturously as an IRA gunman...brandishing a machine gun, briefly made his way through the crowd on to the stage.’⁴⁸ As a result of this demonstration John O’Grady resigned from the post of Tipperary GAA Public Relations Officer, in protest at the GAA allowing ‘itself to be used for extremist propaganda purposes.’⁴⁹ In his letter of resignation, O’Grady explained that his job as columnist with the *Tipperary Star* was interfering with his duties as PRO and that ‘recent happenings in Casement Park where Provisional Sinn Féin were granted the use of the pitch by the G.A.A. to display their power did not help either.’⁵⁰ Tom Woulfe also criticised the use of Casement Park, stating that the demonstration indicated the ‘current winds of extremism in the GAA’ and called on the association’s management committee to issue a public statement disassociating the GAA from paramilitary extremism.⁵¹ On 17 August, the GAA released a

⁴⁵ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ *An Phoblacht/Republican News* was an amalgamation of the southern based newspaper *An Phoblacht* and the northern based newspaper *Republican News*.

⁴⁷ Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, pp. 33-34.

⁴⁸ *Irish Press*, 13 August 1979.

⁴⁹ *Irish Press*, 15 August 1979.

⁵⁰ Tipperary County Board minutes, 3 September 1979, Tipperary Minute Book 1975-1982, p. 300.

⁵¹ *Irish Press*, 16 August 1979.

statement disassociating itself from the Casement Park demonstration and reiterating the association's 'condemnation of violence from whatever source'.⁵²

In August 1979, republican prisoner, Bobby Sands, in a communication to the IRA leadership, wrote of ways to reinvigorate the prison campaign. Sands suggested a 'Smash H-Block' campaign consisting of a poster campaign, door-to-door canvassing and a letter-writing drive.⁵³ Sinn Féin held an internal party conference in September 1979 with the sole aim of devising ways to avoid a prison hunger strike. It was at this September conference that Sinn Féin made the decision to participate in the October 1979 Central Relatives Action Co-ordinating Committee's 'Smash H-Block' conference. Prior to this, Sinn Féin attempted to portray the prison-struggle as part of its overall 'national struggle' and the party differed with the RACs, and other prison protestors, on a number of occasions. In deciding to participate in the October 1979 conference, Sinn Féin decided it would be more flexible in its approach to a broad front but would not insist that all present explicitly support the 'armed struggle'. Sinn Féin submitted six motions for consideration to this October 1979 conference, including that 'this campaign...should be orientated towards mobilising national support particularly amongst the organised Labour Movement, community organisations and cultural organisations and also mobilising international support.'⁵⁴

At this 'Smash H-Block' conference, held in Belfast on 21 October, a seventeen-member National H-Block Committee (later known as the National H-Block/Armagh Committee) was established, with Piaras Ó Dúill as chairman and Christina Carney as secretary, 'to spearhead a national campaign of publicity and of militant protests in order to force the British government to concede political prisoner status.'⁵⁵ The National H-Block Committee launched an international protest campaign 'helped by the prisoners who busily churned out smuggled letters by the thousand to VIPs around the world, appealing for help.'⁵⁶ As part of this national and international publicity campaign, units of the GAA, in the latter half of 1979, received correspondence from the H-Block prisoners. Letters to the Kerry and Dublin football teams, almost identical in content, appealed to the GAA to support the 'Smash H-Block' campaign. In the letters, the prisoners described their living conditions in 'one of Englands [sic] concentration camps in Ireland' and asked both the Dublin and Kerry football

⁵² *Irish Press*, 18 August 1979.

⁵³ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 61.

⁵⁴ National H-Block/Armagh Committee papers, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁵⁵ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 63.

⁵⁶ Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, p. 34.

teams to add their ‘weight or voice in whatever way you can to help Smash H-Block, every little gesture of help no matter how small could help save the life of an Irish political prisoner.’⁵⁷

As agreed at their inaugural October 1979 conference, the National H-Block Committee held a conference in Dublin, on 16 December, for the purpose of electing a ‘sub-committee...that will direct a single issue campaign in the 26 counties’ with the hope that ‘such a campaign will widen and consolidate support for the “blanket” prisoners with special emphasis on humanitarian principles.’ At this conference a motion was passed that the twenty-six counties sub-committee ‘should orient the campaign to winning and mobilising broad support, particularly among the organised labour movement, community organisations and cultural organisations’, and that the campaign should be promoted by ‘Seeking support from organisations and individuals to sponsor [sic] major advertisements in the national press...[and]...Organising days of action aimed at involving specific sections of the population such as Trade Unions, Sporting, Cultural and women’s groups etc.’⁵⁸

In the build-up to this 16 December conference, invitations were issued to social, cultural, and political groups and personnel, including the GAA. These invitations explained the aims of the conference and asked the recipient groups to sponsor the conference. While the Abbey Theatre, Conradh na Gaeilge and Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann were included on the list of sponsors for this conference, the GAA was not named as a sponsor-organisation. Liam Cotter, however, attended the conference on behalf of Kerry GAA and informed delegates that Kerry GAA ‘had passed a motion on political status for the H-Block prisoners and this had been forwarded to the [1980] GAA Congress.’⁵⁹ This frustrated Tom Woulfe. In a letter to the *Irish Press*, Woulfe recalled that Central Council’s refusal to entertain the 1934 Kerry motion calling for the release of political prisoners paid ‘handsomely in public prestige’ and urged the 1980 Central Council to ‘give politics – non-party politics in particular – a wide berth.’⁶⁰ Despite this, the Kerry motion - ‘That Congress condemns torture in H-Block on humanitarian grounds’ - was passed at the 1980 Annual Congress, held in Down on 29/30 March 1980. Woulfe attempted to argue that the motion did not go far enough and Congress should extend sympathy to all those who had suffered from violence in Ireland but Patrick McFlynn, GAA

⁵⁷ Undated letter from Long Kesh Republican Prisoners to the Dublin football team, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

⁵⁸ National H-Block / Armagh Committee papers, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁵⁹ *Irish Press*, 17 December 1979.

⁶⁰ *Irish Press*, 20 December 1979.

president, requested that Woulfe 'stick with the motion as it stood',⁶¹ stating that 'a similar motion was before Congress last year also and the position of the Association in relation to this was very clear...This was being done purely on humanitarian grounds like many other bodies and noted clergy.'⁶²

While the passing of the H-Block motion was reported in the press, meriting a front page headline - 'GAA condemns H-Block "torture"' - in the *Irish Times*,⁶³ the story was somewhat overshadowed by the continued debate surrounding the non-party-political rule, Rule 7,⁶⁴ and the British military's occupation of Saint Oliver Plunkett Park.⁶⁵ The adoption of the H-Block motion was, however, seized upon by the National H-Block Committee as evidence of GAA support for the prisoners 'five demands'.⁶⁶ At the 15 June 1980 National H-Block 'recall conference', held in Belfast - a conference the GAA was invited to attend and to which Antrim GAA sent a message of support - Piaras Ó Dúill, in his chairman's address, informed attendees that 'motions condemning H-Blocks...had been passed...by trade union branches and organisations such as the G.A.A. and Conradh na Gaeilge' Ó Dúill added that while resolutions were not enough, they were 'at least a sign that there is a growing awareness of the issues involved.'⁶⁷ Similarly, local H-Block Committees started including the name of the GAA in advertising literature. In a pamphlet advertising a march in Limerick, on 13 September 1980, the Limerick Smash H-Block Committee included a line that organisations including the GAA had all 'spoken out publicly in condemnation of the plight of the prisoners in their fight for political status.'⁶⁸

Also at the 15 June National H-Block Committee recall conference, a motion was passed calling 'for the setting up of sub-committees, to organise intervention similar to Trade Union intervention in other spheres, e.g. Womens [sic] Movement, students, sporting and

⁶¹ *Irish Independent*, 31 March 1980.

⁶² 1980 Annual Congress Minutes, p. 69.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 31 March 1980.

⁶⁴ *Irish Independent*, 31 March 1980.

⁶⁵ *Irish Press*, 31 March 1980.

⁶⁶ In January 1980 the republican prisoners, after careful consideration and debate, published their 'five demands'. These demands were designed to focus the campaign on a very specific programme while, at the same time, give the British plenty of room to manoeuvre as there was no emotive terminology attached. The demands were (1) the right to wear their own clothes, (2) no prison work, (3) free association with other POWs, (4) a visit, parcel and letters and (5) return of remission lost due to protest action on the blanket. Brian Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve my Time, The H-Block Struggle 1976-1981* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1994), p. 104.

⁶⁷ National H-Block / Armagh Committee papers. Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁶⁸ Limerick Smash H Block Committee pamphlet advertising 13 September 1980 march in Limerick, GAA Library and Archive.

cultural organisations.⁶⁹ While a trade union sub-committee was established by the National H-Block Committee, no other sub-committees were formally established.⁷⁰ Jim Gibney later explained that the resources were not available to the National H-Block Committee to form several sub-committees so, instead, Ó Dúill appointed various members of the national committee to meet with representatives from different sectors of society.⁷¹ An internal memo was disseminated within the National H-Block Committee detailing how the committee should approach the various groups. Under the heading 'Sporting Organisations' this memo detailed that

(a) GAA – National Committee will write to the G.A.A. and request them to

1. Issue statement of support.
2. Circulate branches about the H-Block activities.
3. Ask Clubs to support the local rallies.
4. Organise fund-raising and support football match, e.g. selected Kerry team and selected Armagh team.
5. Bring banners and football teams to activities.
6. Meet with members of the H-Block Committee to discuss the situation.

(b) Other sporting organisations – National Committee will write to them and request as above.⁷²

While the above memo clearly indicates that the National H-Block Committee planned to approach other sporting organisations, the GAA was the sole sporting body approached by the Committee. Jim Gibney explained that, against the backdrop of the National H-Block Committee's message being 'censored or ignored', the Committee viewed the GAA as a 'hugely popular organisation, with people in it who would have been sympathetic to the prisoners' cause, or certainly not hostile to them.' The National H-Block Committee realised that the GAA could provide the committee with 'a ready-made audience...one that came together at matches all over the island. That was a natural and almost obvious choice for people then to focus in on and lobby the GAA.'⁷³

⁶⁹ National H-Block / Armagh Committee papers, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁷⁰ Prior to the formation of the National H-Block Committee, there was a group of trade-unionists in Belfast called the Trade Union Campaign Against Repression (TUCAR) – this group was the genesis of the H-Block trade-union sub-committee.

⁷¹ Interview with Jim Gibney, Belfast, 4 October 2014.

⁷² Incomplete and undated internal National H-Block Committee memo. National H-Block / Armagh Committee papers, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁷³ Interview with Jim Gibney, Belfast, 4 October 2014.

The National H-Block Committee, and Sinn Féin, were particularly keen to secure GAA support for, and involvement in, the series of local and national H-Block marches that the two organisations undertook throughout 1980. When preparing for a 1980 march in Armagh, Derry republican Martha McClelland gave a detailed report to the National H-Block Committee on the preparations for an upcoming 20 April 1980 Derry march, with the committee agreeing 'that the Armagh organisers would prepare in a similar manner i.e. publicise in the newspapers, write to the G.A.A.'⁷⁴ Similarly, the Sinn Féin POW Department issued an internal memo on 3 April, in which they explained the steps they had taken to secure support for the Derry march. The memo detailed that Sinn Féin had asked organisations and groups, including the GAA, to place advertisements in support of the march in the local newspapers, with the aim of a 'two-week statement blitz in the local press a fortnight before the march.'⁷⁵ Despite the claim, in the 3 April memo, that the GAA inserted notices of support for the 20 April march, no GAA clubs inserted an individual advertisement of support in either the *Derry Journal* or the *Irish News* prior to the march. (Individual club advertisements were to become very popular during the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes.) Several GAA players and clubs were, however, included in the National H-Block Committee's 'partial list of those endorsing these five demands and the Derry March on April 20th' which was published in 18 April edition of the *Derry Journal*.⁷⁶

Despite the growing campaign initiated by the National H-Block Committee, the protesting prisoners, in October 1980, having been on protest for over four years and with no end in sight, decided that the prison-protests would have to reach their conclusion. On 27 October seven prisoners refused food, marking the start of the 1980 hunger strike. The formation of the National H-Block Committee, in October 1979, was a seminal moment in the history of the overall prison-campaign. While there was some overlap in membership between the National H-Block Committee and Sinn Féin, the National H-Block Committee was independent of any political party, and contained members with backgrounds as diverse as the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP). This, according to F. Stuart Ross, opened the door to a purely humanitarian approach with political differences set aside for the sole purpose of campaigning on behalf of the prisoners. As discussed, the National H-Block Committee was particularly keen to involve the GAA in

⁷⁴ National H-Block / Armagh Committee meeting minutes, 12 April 1980, Linen Hall Library.

⁷⁵ 3 April 1980 Sinn Féin memo, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

⁷⁶ *Derry Journal*, 18 April 1980.

all aspects of its campaign. The fact that the National H-Block Committee was a non-party-political organisation allowed units of the GAA to respond to the approaches of the Committee, without breaching the amended Rule 7. While there was some interaction between the National H-Block Committee and various units of the GAA, it was very limited and at a local level only. It was not until the commencement of the 1980 hunger strike that the national leadership of the GAA met and developed a relationship with the National H-Block Committee.

IV.

The GAA, throughout the build-up and outset of the 1980 H-Block hunger strike, became embroiled in an acrimonious debate with the Garda Representative Association (GRA), played out through the media, over allegations that the GAA was equivocal in its condemnation of republican violence. This dispute affected the way in which the association responded to the hunger strike, and the manner in which others viewed their responses. Detective-Garda Seamus Quaid (originally from Feohanagh, county Limerick, but a winner of an All-Ireland hurling medal with Wexford in 1960) was shot, and killed, in Ballyconnick, Wexford, on 13 October 1980, while searching a van suspected of transporting arms.⁷⁷ This followed on from the July 1980 deaths of Gardai John Morley and Henry Byrne who were shot dead as they attempted to arrest three men who had earlier robbed the Bank of Ireland at Ballaghaderreen, Roscommon.⁷⁸ Sean Ó Síocháin, former Director-General of the GAA, represented the association at the funeral of Quaid, held on 16 October, while members of the 1960 Wexford hurling team, alongside Gardai, formed the funeral cortege. Patrick McFlynn, GAA president, issued a statement condemning the 'cold-blooded and deliberate murder of Seamus Quaid', adding that the 'G.A.A. has consistently and unequivocally condemned men of violence and does so again in these tragic circumstances.'⁷⁹ This condemnation was carried in the *Irish Times*,⁸⁰ *Irish Independent*⁸¹ and *Irish Press*⁸² on the day of Quaid's funeral.

Members of An Garda Síochána, in response to the killing of Seamus Quaid, held a special meeting in Enniscorthy, on 23 October, when 'strong calls were made for the G.A.A. to make public its attitude towards the recent deaths of Gardai in Roscommon and Wexford' with the suggestion that 'if this statement is not forthcoming Gardai should reduce their

⁷⁷ *Irish Times*, 14 October 1980.

⁷⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 July 1980.

⁷⁹ GAA News Release, 15 October 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

⁸⁰ *Irish Times*, 16 October 1980.

⁸¹ *Irish Independent*, 16 October 1980.

⁸² *Irish Press*, 16 October, 1980.

involvement in GAA activities.’⁸³ The Enniscorthy meeting also supported criticism levelled at the GAA by Fianna Fáil Senator Rory Kiely, Chairman of the Limerick GAA county board and a personal friend of Quaid,⁸⁴ and Mick O’Connell, former Kerry footballer, that the association had not cancelled or postponed matches as a mark of respect to the murdered Garda.⁸⁵ In turn, Frank Murphy, Secretary of the Cork county board, criticised Kiely and O’Connell, saying that they had introduced politics into the affairs of the GAA.⁸⁶

McFlynn immediately issued another statement in which he highlighted the historic ‘close and cordial relationship’ between the GAA and An Garda Síochána, called the loss of the three Gardaí ‘a grave loss to the Gardaí and the GAA’ and reiterated that the GAA ‘has consistently and unequivocally condemned violence and men of violence and does so yet again.’⁸⁷ This statement was reported throughout the national media including the *Irish Independent*,⁸⁸ *Irish Times*,⁸⁹ *Irish Press*⁹⁰ and *Irish News*,⁹¹ with McFlynn criticising the media for not giving more coverage to the Association’s original condemnation of the Quaid murder.⁹² Some days later the *Irish Independent* reported that at a meeting, on 29 October 1980, in Rathmines Garda Station, over seventy Gardaí from “P” District unanimously passed a motion calling on all members of the force to withdraw from participation in the affairs of the GAA ‘until such time as the G.A.A. make clear their attitude to the men of violence.’ A spokesman for the District stated that the motion ‘was in direct relation to the deaths of Detectives John Morley...and Seamus Quaid...and the G.A.A. not cancelling matches in the areas in the immediate aftermath of the shootings, and failing to come out and condemn the killings.’⁹³ The *Belfast Telegraph* reported that, at the Rathmines meeting, ‘allegations were made that funds collected at some GAA matches were passed on to the men of violence’ and that there ‘were also allegations that after a minute’s silence was observed in memory of Det. Quaid at last week’s Wexford County Final that records such as “The Men Behind the Wire” were played over the public address system.’⁹⁴ Coincidentally, the day after the Rathmines

⁸³ *Irish Independent*, 24 October 1980.

⁸⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 October 1980.

⁸⁵ *Irish Times*, 25 October 1980.

⁸⁶ Munster Provincial Council minutes, 24 October 1980, Munster Provincial Council Minute Book 1980, p. 181.

⁸⁷ GAA News Release, 24 October 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

⁸⁸ *Irish Independent*, 25 October 1980.

⁸⁹ *Irish Times*, 25 October 1980.

⁹⁰ *Irish Press*, 25 October 1980.

⁹¹ *Irish News*, 25 October 1980.

⁹² *Irish Press*, 25 October 1980.

⁹³ *Irish Independent*, 30 October 1980.

⁹⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 October 1980.

motion was passed an auction was held, on 31 October 1980, in the Victor Hotel, Dun Laoghaire, to raise funds for the Morley-Byrne Dependents Fund. This fund was administered through the Bank of Ireland 'with trustees largely drawn from G.A.A. officials',⁹⁵ with the Coiste Bainisti⁹⁶ and the Leinster,⁹⁷ Munster⁹⁸ and Connacht⁹⁹ councils all contributing money to the fund.

McFlynn responded to the Gardaí's motion with yet another press release, expressing his surprise at the outcome of the Rathmines meeting and again reiterating that the GAA was totally opposed to violence and men of violence.¹⁰⁰ McFlynn also told the *Irish Independent* that the GAA 'have in no way indicated that we support subversives' and that, on the issue of matches not being cancelled in the aftermath of the killings, there is 'no *modus operandi* for the G.A.A. leadership to do this. It is something that is done at local level, just the same as matches are postponed after the death of a local club chairman, for instance.' In the same article, Jack Marrinan, General Secretary of the GRA, raised the issue of songs 'in support of violence' which had been played at GAA grounds but McFlynn insisted that 'no crime or disrespect has been committed by the G.A.A. in this whole affair', adding that he thought 'the Gardaí are being misguided. A hare has been set by somebody, and it's all unnecessary and unfortunate.'¹⁰¹ The failure to cancel matches and the playing of songs 'in support of violence' were symptoms of a larger concern the Gardaí held about the GAA: in the November 1980 issue of *Garda Review* it was reported that, over the course of public discussions on the GAA, members of the Gardaí made 'later reference...to a recent amendment in the GAA rules which allows that Association to engage in non-party politics. The wording of a resolution passed by the 1979 GAA Congress stressing that the GAA support "the struggle for national liberation" gave grounds for further concern.'¹⁰²

On 3 November, the *Irish Times* reported that the GRA were seeking a meeting with 'leading officials of the Gaelic Athletic Association to discuss the concern expressed by sections of the force about alleged ambivalence in the GAA to IRA activities.' The *Irish Times* reported that Marrinan 'accepted that much of the controversy was caused by

⁹⁵ *Irish Independent*, 29 October 1980.

⁹⁶ Coiste Bainisti minutes, 7-8 November 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 212.

⁹⁷ Leinster Provincial Council minutes, 10 December 1980, Leinster Council Minute Book 1975-1981, p. 3724.

⁹⁸ 1981 Annual Convention Report, p. 75.

⁹⁹ Connacht Provincial Council Minute Book 1976-1983, p. 171.

¹⁰⁰ GAA News Release, 30 October 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁰¹ *Irish Independent*, 31 October 1980.

¹⁰² *Garda Review*, November 1980.

misunderstandings, but there were good grounds for such misunderstandings.’ Marrinan also accepted that ‘the GAA had a moderate leadership which condemned violence’ but argued that the ‘motion passed at the 1979 GAA Congress supporting the struggle for national liberation was similar to sentiments expressed by subversive groups.’ Finally, Marrinan raised the point that ‘a man who had been playing football for five years had to leave the GAA because he became a member of the RUC, while at the same time men convicted of subversive offences could be accommodated in the GAA even in a playing capacity.’¹⁰³

The Coiste Bainistí of the GAA held a special meeting on 3 November, at which the ‘allegations made by the Gardai’ were discussed. Patrick McFlynn informed the meeting that representatives of the association had met with representatives of the GRA where the ‘position of the G.A.A. had been made very clear’ and the ‘Gardai for their part had agreed...to do all in their power to kill the controversy and control their members.’ At this meeting a joint GAA/GRA statement was agreed, which asserted that the ‘Garda representatives were assured of the continued support of the G.A.A. in ensuring that law and order prevail in our society and the G.A.A. also confirmed that it condemns violence of any kind, including that perpetrated by subversive organisations.’ The statement concluded that a ‘number of misunderstandings were cleared up to the satisfaction of both sides and it was agreed to maintain close liaison in the future.’¹⁰⁴ This statement was carried on the front pages of the 4 November newspapers, including the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Irish Press*, all of which declared that the row between the two organisations over. At the 7/8 November Coiste Bainistí meeting it was noted that the ‘press release had served to bring the public controversy to an end’ with the decision that the GAA would still meet the Association of Sergeants and Inspectors to ‘clear up any misunderstandings which that body might have.’¹⁰⁵ The GRA reported, through *Garda Review*, that they ‘regarded the outcome of their discussions with the GAA representatives as satisfactory’ and that ‘they were quite satisfied that the GAA is an organisation which supports the Garda Síochána...and...that if the public statements which the President of the GAA has made in this respect had received wider publicity some of the misunderstandings would not have arisen.’¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Irish Times*, 3 November 1980.

¹⁰⁴ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 3 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁰⁵ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 7-8 November 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 218.

¹⁰⁶ *Garda Review*, November 1980.

While the dispute between the GAA and the GRA may have been an isolated one, the possibility has to be considered that elements within An Garda Síochána, or the GRA, were using the death of Seamus Quaid to pressurise the GAA into remaining out of the H-Block controversy. Although Quaid's death took place on the same day the hunger strike was announced, 13 October, the hunger strike was widely expected and both the British and Irish security forces would have been aware that, in the event of a hunger strike, the GAA would be approached by the republican movement to come out in support of the hunger strike. The name of the GAA had already appeared on National H-Block Committee literature. On the three occasions that the GAA condemned the murder of Quaid, the association also 'consistently and unequivocally condemned men of violence', yet the reaction of the GRA on each occasion was to criticise the GAA for not making clear 'their attitude to the men of violence.' Furthermore, the stated threat of the Gardai to withdraw from, and boycott, the GAA did not seem to have the support of all Gardai members. Two high-profile Garda GAA Kerry footballers, Paidí Ó Sé, a Limerick based Garda until 1979, and John Egan, whom *The Kerryman* called 'probably the best known Garda GAA player in the country', condemned the threatened boycott with interviews in the *Belfast Telegraph*¹⁰⁷ and *The Kerryman* respectively. Egan, in his interview, called the row 'completely over-rated and exaggerated' and stated 'I never felt that the GAA had any feelings against me because I was a Garda. I have no crib at all with the GAA. It's something that should not have happened. What are people looking for from the GAA?'¹⁰⁸

It is also possible that the GRA, or elements within the GRA, used the death of Quaid to highlight the perceived republican ethos of the GAA in an attempt to embarrass the association over its continued ban on members of the British security forces, and members of the RUC in particular. Peter Quinn explained that the Ulster council was

well aware that there was a rump in the Gardai which was strongly opposed to the ban on the security forces in the North, especially the RUC, with which some of them had close contacts. And we were aware that those same people used every opportunity to castigate the GAA as being republican and extremist. Whether that was a majority view within the Gardai, I very much doubt. In my opinion it was a small minority with a political agenda. And whether that influenced senior people in the GRA to attempt to create the impression that, in some way, either North or South of the border, GAA people were anti-Gardai, has long been a matter of concern to certain GAA people. But if they wished to give that

¹⁰⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 November 1980.

¹⁰⁸ *The Kerryman*, 7 November 1980.

impression they were wrong – totally and unequivocally wrong. There was never an anti-Gardaí attitude within the GAA in my time on the Ulster Council or since then.¹⁰⁹

Whether orchestrated or not, the dispute with the GRA, played out publicly through the national media, influenced the GAA's response to hunger strike, particularly amongst county boards in the Republic of Ireland, as shall be discussed below. In Northern Ireland, Father Denis Faul blamed the dispute between the GAA and the Gardaí for the low turnout of the middle class at H-Block demonstrations, saying that these 'people with clout' were 'confused and had been intimidated by the row between the GAA and Gardaí.'¹¹⁰

V.

This section will focus on how the GAA reacted to the internal and external pressures applied to the association during the 1980 H-Block hunger strike. Between October and December 1980 the GAA came under strenuous pressure, from both the republican movement and, in some cases, GAA members, to publicly support the five demands of the hunger strikers. Support for the hunger strikers was not universal, however, and many GAA members remained totally opposed to any GAA involvement in the hunger strike. The governing bodies of the GAA (the Coiste Bainistí and Ulster Council in particular) had to lead the association through this divisive period, cognisant of the rules of the association and the differing views of GAA members.

The catalyst for the 1980 hunger strike was the perceived breakdown in Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich's negotiations with Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), negotiations which had commenced in March 1980. A period of 'intense and passionate' debate took place within the H-Blocks with the decision taken in September 1980 that a hunger strike would commence in October 1980.¹¹¹ On 27 October, seven men, Brendan Hughes (Belfast); Raymond McCartney (Derry); Tommy McKearney (Tyrone); Leo Green (Armagh); Sean McKenna (Down); Tom McFeely (Co. Derry) and John Nixon (Armagh), refused food, marking the beginning of the 1980 hunger strike. Three of these seven men - Green,¹¹² McKearney¹¹³ and McFeely¹¹⁴ - were members of

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

¹¹⁰ *Irish Echo*, 15 November 1980.

¹¹¹ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 108.

¹¹² Clan na nGael C.L.G. Lurgan, Armagh. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 22 November 1980.

¹¹³ Academy and Tyrone Minors. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 6 December 1980.

¹¹⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News* does identify not McFeely's club but the paper credits him with winning trophies at minor and senior levels, being the 'mounting force' behind the first camogie team in Derry and,

the GAA.¹¹⁵ Three female republican prisoners in Armagh Jail, Mairead Farrell, Mairead Nugent and Mary Doyle, joined the hunger strike on 1 December.¹¹⁶ (Within Armagh Jail, female prisoners were allowed wear their own clothes but thirty republican female prisoners had been on a no-wash protest in support of demands for political status since February 1980.¹¹⁷) On 12 December, six Ulster Defence Association (UDA) loyalist prisoners began a hunger strike demanding special-category-status and segregation from republican prisoners.¹¹⁸ On 15/16 December thirty more republican prisoners joined the strike, meaning that a total of 46 prisoners (40 republican and six loyalist) were on hunger strike making it the 'largest hunger strike campaign mounted in Northern Ireland prisons.'¹¹⁹ The republican (H-Blocks) hunger strike ended on 18 December, after 53 days, in a still-disputed manner. The UDA hunger strike ended the day before, 17 December, while the Armagh Jail hunger strike ended the day after, 19 December.

Following the hunger strike, the republican movement attempted to portray an obvious failure as a victory. The official statement from the prisoners, issued through *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, claimed that the strike was called off only after 'having been supplied with a document that contains a new elaboration of our five demands'.¹²⁰ According to Ed Maloney, the 'IRA and Sinn Féin leadership outside the prison pretended that the hunger strike had ended in victory...The authorised version of the first hunger strike, the version put forward by Sinn Féin then and ever since, has the British reneging on the document during these talks.'¹²¹ Thomas Hennessey has called this version of events a 'straightforward lie, issued for propaganda purposes',¹²² while Brendan Hughes, in an interview for the Boston College IRA/UVF Oral History Project, also dismissed this 'authorised version' of the ending of the

before his imprisonment, attending every All-Ireland Senior Football Final. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 27 December 1980.

¹¹⁵ Peter Harte, at the 22 November 1980 Coiste Bainistí meeting, stated that four of the seven original republican hunger strikers were members of the GAA. (H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.) *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, however, in their weekly 'Portrait of a Hunger Striker' series, which provided a biography of each of seven men, listed only three of the men as GAA members.

¹¹⁶ *Irish Times*, 1 December 1980.

¹¹⁷ *Irish Times*, 1 December 1980.

¹¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 12 December 1980.

¹¹⁹ *Irish Times*, 16 December 1980.

¹²⁰ O'Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, p. 33.

¹²¹ Ed Moloney, *Voices from the Grave, Two Men's War in Ireland* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2010), p. 241.

¹²² Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, pp. 462-463.

hunger strike. Hughes explained that he had given McKenna a guarantee that he would not let him die and he consequently ended the hunger strike on humanitarian grounds.¹²³

While the 1980 hunger strike represented a major escalation in the 'Prison War', Hennessey has shown that both the republican movement and the British government knew that the 'battle would be for public opinion'.¹²⁴ The republican prisoners knew that the hunger strike alone would not restore special-category-status. Instead, the hunger strike was to be used by the republican prisoners as a vehicle to generate national and international sympathy, and support, for the prisoners which would, in turn, pressurise the British government to concede the prisoners' demands. As the hunger strike began, Hughes called for such support stating that 'Death most certainly awaits us unless you, on the outside, can build a united, strong and co-ordinated showing of concern.'¹²⁵ Every aspect of the strike was meticulously planned to maximise public sympathy: the prisoners refrained, as much as possible, from referring to 'political' or 'special-category-status', but instead talked of their 'five just demands'; the seven men chosen to go on hunger strike represented a wide geographical area - five of the six Northern Ireland counties,¹²⁶ while prisoners sentenced as a consequence of sectarian or particularly infamous charges were not allowed on the hunger strike.¹²⁷ The hunger strike itself was timed so that it would peak at Christmas.

Within Long Kesh, a 'renewed letter campaign began, thereafter churning out hundreds of letters, written on toilet and cigarette papers, to all and sundry calling for their support for the five demands.'¹²⁸ Despite the fact that the prisoners had no pens or writing paper an organised structure was established whereby different blocks, or wings within the blocks, would write to different organisations, with a log kept of all letters sent to ensure maximum exposure. Community organisations, trade unions and newspapers were all contacted and asked to come out in public support of the hunger strikers. The GAA, at all levels, also received letters from within the Long Kesh prison as part of this 'renewed letter campaign'. The GAA was the

¹²³ Moloney, *Voices from the Grave*, p. 239.

¹²⁴ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 83.

¹²⁵ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 96.

¹²⁶ Bobby Sands (Belfast) was 'considerably annoyed' and 'gravely disappointed' at having his name removed from the original list of ten hunger strikers. When the list was streamlined to seven the leadership decided that they 'could only include one representative from Belfast to ensure all other regions were covered.' Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 111.

¹²⁷ Republican prisoner Brendan 'Bik' McFarlane was not allowed participate in the hunger strike as the nature of his charges, an attack on a UVF bar which left five dead, would have had a negative effect on the propaganda drive. Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 111.

¹²⁸ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 110.

only Irish sporting body that the prisoners contacted in such a manner. Neither of the soccer governing bodies, the Irish Football Association (IFA), who were regarded as a 'unionist bastion' by republicans,¹²⁹ and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), nor the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) were contacted by the prisoners.¹³⁰ Former republican prisoner Michael Culbert explained that when the prisoners contacted the GAA, the prisoners 'were subtly manipulating the constitution of the GAA to make it difficult for them not to support us... The GAA promotes the concept of the ideology of a 32 county Ireland... and that is what we claimed we were in prison for... You had these moral phrases and phraseology to make it difficult.' Culbert stated that the prisoners used a 'moral bludgeon' when writing to GAA clubs and asked the clubs 'are you going to let these young men from your area die?'¹³¹ One clear example of this is an undated appeal from the republican prisoners (who had retained special-category-status), on behalf of the Blanketmen, to the 'membership of the G.A.A.' in which the prisoners urged the GAA to 'set now to avert deaths in H-Block... mobilise to divert the British Government from its illogical and wholly insane stance on the H-Block impasse.' The prisoners ended their appeal by stating that 'the lives of the 'Blanketmen' in the 'H' Blocks rest in your hands.'¹³² Culbert further explained that it was a mixture of both the perceived nationalist ideology and the localised nature of the GAA that prompted the prisoners to write to the GAA clubs, requesting that these clubs lend the prisoners moral and public support. A letter from forty-five named special-category prisoners, all of whom were members of the GAA, which included their club name beside their (typed) signature, appealed to the GAA to 'step around the external and internal constraints' and 'contribute to the general campaign to expose the grossness of the British error re: attempting to remove status' and to 'give it's [sic] public and unequivocal support to the five just and reasonable demands of our comrades.'¹³³ Two of the hunger strikers, John Nixon¹³⁴ and Tom McFeely, also wrote to the GAA, with McFeely sending the association a 'direct and open appeal for [GAA] support for me and my comrades at present on Hunger Strike in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh'.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Interview with Michael Culbert, Belfast, 24 April 2014.

¹³⁰ Interview with Michael Culbert, Belfast, 24 April 2014.

¹³¹ Interview with Michael Culbert, Belfast, 24 April 2014.

¹³² Undated appeal from 'Republican POWs' to 'membership of the G.A.A.', Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

¹³³ Letter from 'Irish Republican POWs (with status)' to GAA, 20 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹³⁴ Undated handwritten letter from John Nixon, H-Block 3 to the Louth GAA County Board, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹³⁵ Undated copy typed letter from Tom McFeely, H-Block 5 to GAA, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

Within days of the hunger strike beginning, a GAA delegation (Patrick McFlynn, Con Murphy, Alf Murray and Liam Mulvihill) met with representatives of the National H-Block Committee (Bob Murray,¹³⁶ Jim Gibney, Piaras Ó Dúill and Bernadette McAliskey) and discussed ways in which the GAA could potentially contribute to the H-Block campaign. From the outset, McFlynn insisted that the GAA ‘must at all times act independently and must be seen not to get involved in political matters.’¹³⁷ McAliskey questioned what on-field activities could take place, with the suggestions that GAA players could line up to form the letter ‘H’ before matches and that a decade of the rosary be recited at half time. McAliskey questioned if clubs marching behind their banners at H-Block demonstrations would be acceptable. The National H-Block Committee, while acknowledging the difficulties the GAA faced, requested that a circular be issued by the GAA Central Council and read at all major GAA games, with McAliskey adding that the ‘G.A.A. can play a very constructive role by controlling the youth and getting G.A.A. players to talk to young people and impress on them [the] need for peaceful action and control.’ McAliskey further suggested that the GAA issue a statement which could be ‘strongly worded against all types of violence’; this, McAliskey argued, would ‘allow another whole area of the population to make an appeal on humanitarian grounds.’ McFlynn, in response, informed the National H-Block Committee delegation that the GAA ‘would go to the full limit of what can be done but there is a limit’ and that a statement would be issued shortly.¹³⁸ This meeting was one of at least two meetings that were held between the National H-Block Committee and the higher echelons of the GAA. Jim Gibney later recalled that the meetings were ‘tense’ and that the National H-Block Committee

were driven by the fact that the conditions in the prison were absolutely horrendous, the appalling living conditions and the level of brutality were horrendous, so we didn’t have much sympathy for the niceties or the politics surrounding the issues because we were trying to resolve the matter as quickly as possible...So I think there was a lot of tension around those meetings between the National H-Block/Armagh Committee and the national leadership of the GAA. I don’t think there was any hostility from [the GAA] – I think they were trying to explain to us their difficulties in dealing with these matters.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ At the 24 November 1980 Antrim County Committee meeting, Bob Murray was described as the ‘GAA H-Block Organiser’.

¹³⁷ Unsigned handwritten notes from the undated meeting between the GAA and National H-Block Committee, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹³⁸ Unsigned handwritten notes from the undated meeting between the GAA and National H-Block Committee, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹³⁹ Interview with Jim Gibney, Belfast, 4 October 2014.

The Coiste Bainistí, at their 3 November 1980 special meeting, discussed the H-Block hunger strike. Peter Harte (Peadar Ó hAirt), Chairman of the Ulster Council, stated that 'all the counties in Ulster were strongly in favour of a statement being issued' and McFlynn added that 'feelings were running very high as some county officials and a number of clubs were under tremendous pressure.' McFlynn informed the Coiste Bainistí that, at the meeting with the National H-Block Committee, it had been agreed that any moves the GAA made on the hunger strike would (a) be on humanitarian grounds only, (b) be of such a manner that all members of the GAA would give it their support, (c) it would have to be very clear that any GAA initiative was from the GAA and not from outside bodies and (d) that GAA grounds could not be used for protests. Arising from a discussion on the matter the Coiste Bainistí, at their 3 November Coiste Bainistí meeting, drafted a statement that included:

The Gaelic Athletic Association, as a national organisation with clubs in all the 32 counties has been concerned for some time about the situation of the prisoners in H-Block, Long Kesh....The Association is concerned at recent developments in H-Block and feels that every effort should be made to find a solution to the present impasse without delay.

While we have made it clear that we condemn violence and men of violence, we advocate decent standards and respect for fellow men and add our voice to those who have expressed their concern, on humanitarian grounds, for this continuing situation which can only cause further bitterness and dissension in Ireland.¹⁴⁰

This statement was authorised for release at the next Coiste Bainistí meeting, held on 7/8 November, when it was also decided to issue guidelines to county officials 'with regards to events at local level.'¹⁴¹ The statement appeared in the *Irish Press* on 8 November¹⁴² and the *Irish Independent* on 12 November.¹⁴³ As discussed, the GAA, at their 3 November meeting, also drafted, and released, the joint GAA/GRA statement - it is possible that the release of the H-Block statement was delayed by four days to ensure the row between the GAA and the GRA had ended. It is also highly probable that the row between the GAA and the GRA influenced the tone and contents of the statement, in particular, the condemnation of 'violence and men of violence'.

The republican prisoners in the H-Blocks issued a response to the GAA statement calling it 'not only pathetically weak but a gross insult' and 'a betrayal of the fundamental

¹⁴⁰ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 3 November 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 211.

¹⁴¹ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 7-8 November 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 219.

¹⁴² *Irish Press*, 8 November 1980.

¹⁴³ *Irish Independent*, 12 November 1980.

principles upon which the [GAA] has its basis.’¹⁴⁴ The prisoners believed that the GAA statement was non-committal and they called on the association to come out in full support of the hunger strikers. Richard O’Rawe, H-Block 3, wrote his own letter to the Antrim county board (O’Rawe was a member of the O’Donnell’s GAC) echoing the sentiments of the republican prisoners’ reply, adding that he felt ‘extremely betrayed and bitterly disappointed at the callously lukewarm statement issued by the National Board of the G.A.A.’ O’Rawe questioned the motives of the GAA statement, adding that ‘humanitarian motives are commendable but no true Irishman should feel obliged to compromise the fact that we are political prisoners to facilitate British political expediency.’¹⁴⁵ This letter was submitted to the Antrim County Committee by Bob Murray (who attended the meeting as St. Paul’s delegate) and read out at a 24 November 1980 meeting.¹⁴⁶ O’Rawe’s dismissal of GAA support that was based on humanitarian grounds is an indication of the distinct positions that those within the prison campaign held, as it was McAliskey who had specifically argued for the value of GAA support that could be presented as humanitarian in its intervention.

In addition to receiving correspondence from the republican movement, the GAA also received material from those opposed to the restoration of special-category-status. John Armstrong, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All-Ireland, wrote (on behalf of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland) to the GAA, in late November 1980. In his letter, Armstrong wrongly addressed the association as ‘one of those...organisations who have come out in support of the five demands’ and he urged the association to study *The “H-Block” Issue: An Interim Study*, published by the Irish Council of Churches’ Advisory Forum on Human Rights in June 1980. The Advisory Forum, in their publication, concluded that it did not believe that ‘a more favoured “special category” for “political” prisoners can be justified. It is not sure that a less [sic] favoured status for “political” prisoners is compatible with a democratic society with a concern for civilised standards’.¹⁴⁷ Armstrong, in his letter, added that the ‘decriminalising of the activities of serious offenders on both sides of the political divide would...[give] a cloak of respectability and credibility to the perpetrators of violent crime’ and he urged the GAA to reconsider their stance on the issue and ‘bring your influence to bear on

¹⁴⁴ Undated republican reply to statement from GAA, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁴⁵ Undated letter from Richard O’Rawe, Long Kesh, to the Antrim GAA County Board, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁴⁶ Antrim County Committee minutes, 24 November 1980.

¹⁴⁷ *The “H-Block” Issue: An Interim Study*. Irish Council of Churches’ Advisory Forum on Human Rights in June 1980, p. 11.

the leaders of the campaign of violence to bring it to an end.’¹⁴⁸ The British Embassy in Ireland sent the GAA copies of the eight-page pamphlet *H Blocks: The Facts*, published by the Northern Ireland Office in October 1980 and sent to ‘M.P.s, British Embassies and every media organisation around the world.’¹⁴⁹

While the 8 November Coiste Bainistí statement did not support the prisoners’ demands, some Ulster clubs, throughout the hunger strike, placed advertisements in local and provincial newspapers declaring their support for the demands of the hunger strikers. The *Irish News* carried such messages of support from groups including Relatives Action Committees, republican social clubs and prisoner support groups. GAA clubs, however, reacted independently and in a varied manner – many Ulster clubs did not place advertisements in newspapers while a very brief analysis of the advertisements in the *Ulster Herald* reveals the disparities that existed amongst Tyrone clubs. Some Tyrone clubs¹⁵⁰ agreed with the Central Council and called for a humanitarian solution to the protest; other clubs¹⁵¹ declared support for the prisoners demands and urged people to attend demonstrations, while Tattyreagh GFC, in addition to declaring its support for the prisoners, called on the British Government to ‘remove its Army of Occupation from Irish soil’ and ‘allow the Irish Nation to exercise democratic self-determination, free from foreign interference.’¹⁵² GAA clubs also placed advertisements of support in the *Derry Journal*,¹⁵³ the *Fermanagh Herald*,¹⁵⁴ the *Irish Echo*¹⁵⁵ and the *Irish Post*.¹⁵⁶ The South Antrim clubs wrote a letter, published in the *Andersonstown News*, stating that they, at their 1980 Convention, had passed a resolution fully supporting the ‘five basic demands of the prisoners in H-Blocks and Armagh Jails.’¹⁵⁷ This was despite the Antrim county board, in reply to a H-Block query from St. Malachy’s GAC, requesting that clubs ‘let the matter rest at the moment’ and await directions from the Coiste Bainistí.¹⁵⁸ The placing of advertisements in the local and provincial newspapers publicly linked GAA clubs,

¹⁴⁸ Letter from John Armstrong to the Chairman of the GAA, November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁴⁹ *Ulster Herald*, 8 November 1980.

¹⁵⁰ Beragh Red Knights GFC and Dromore GFC. *Ulster Herald*, 15 November 1980 & 13 December 1980.

¹⁵¹ Greencastle GFC, Saint Ciarán’s GFC and Newtown Stewart Saint Eugene’s GFC. *Ulster Herald*, 1 November 1980, 15 November 1980 & 13 December 1980.

¹⁵² *Ulster Herald*, 13 December 1980, p. 2.

¹⁵³ Sean Dolan GFC and Pearse GFC. *Derry Journal*, 31 October 1980 & 4 November 1980.

¹⁵⁴ St. Patrick’s GFC, Kinawley GFC, Lisnaskea GFC, Belcoo, Derrylin O’Connell’s GFC and Roslea GFC. *Fermanagh Herald*, 29 November 1980, 6 December 1980 & 20 December 1980.

¹⁵⁵ Tyrone GAA of New York. *Irish Echo*, 20 December 1980.

¹⁵⁶ Tir Conaill Gaels. *Irish Post*, 29 November 1980.

¹⁵⁷ *Andersonstown News*, 1 November 1980.

¹⁵⁸ Antrim County Committee minutes, 20 October 1980.

and by extension the GAA as a whole, to the hunger strikes and could be interpreted as a party-political act. While the Central Council 'made clear their dissatisfaction' about the placing of such advertisements to the Ulster Council, the Ulster council, according to Peter Quinn,

took a decision that if we decided to discipline clubs - as we could have done because there was a breach, or at least it could have been interpreted as a breach, of our rules in that they could be construed as being involved in political activity - they would have argued that they weren't involved in political activity but that they were involved in humanitarian activity...we decided that we would just close the proverbial eye. We took a decision not to intervene...The decision was taken almost by default; we didn't intervene on the first one and there were a few phone calls and then everybody decided well we didn't intervene in the first one so why start now. The first one had already been in the paper and there was nothing we could do about it so why intervene in the second one, or the third one, or the fourth one or the tenth one.¹⁵⁹

GAA clubs also took part in H-Block protests: Saint Patrick's GFC placed an advertisement in the *Newry Reporter*, pledging their support to the hunger strikers and 'to the Camlough to Newry march on Sunday 9 November 1980.'¹⁶⁰ This Camlough to Newry march was attended by 'several thousand' at which 'there were a number of bands in the long procession and banners were carried by the various groups participating.'¹⁶¹ Dromintee GFC (Armagh) later placed their own advertisement in the *Newry Reporter* fully supporting the hunger strikers 'and the marches both past and in the future.'¹⁶² In 29 November issue of the *Irish News*, seventy-one named clubs (twenty-three from Antrim,¹⁶³ seventeen from Derry¹⁶⁴ and thirty-one from Tyrone¹⁶⁵) declared their support for the hunger strikers' demands and stated that 'All GAA clubs and members are invited to join us in the Belfast demonstration on Sunday 30 November.'¹⁶⁶ This advertisement may be linked to a previous advertisement in the

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

¹⁶⁰ *Newry Reporter*, 6 November 1980.

¹⁶¹ *Newry Reporter*, 13 November 1980.

¹⁶² *Newry Reporter*, 27 November 1980.

¹⁶³ An Phiarsaigh CLCG, Ardoyne GAC, Ballycastle GAC, Cargin GAC, Clonard GAC, Davitt's GAC, Dwyers GAC, Gael Uladh GAC, Gort na Mona GAC, Lamh Dearg GAC, McDermott's GAC, Mitchel's GAC, Naomh Eanna CLCG, O'Connell's GAC, O'Donnell's GAC, O'Donovan Rossa GAC, St Agnes' GAC, St. John's GAC, St. Malachy's GAC, St. Gall's GAC, St Paul's GAC, St. Teresa's GAC, Sarsfield's GAC.

¹⁶⁴ Ballymaguigan GFC, Bellaghy GAC, Castledawson GFC, Craigbane GFC, Doire Colmcille GAC, Dolans GAC, Drum GFC, Drumsurn GAC, Dungiven GAC, Glack GAC, Glenullin GAC, Greenlough GFC, Lavey GFC, Loup GFC, Newbridge GFC, Slaughtneil GAC, Swatragh GAC,

¹⁶⁵ Ardboe GFC, Aghyaran GFC, Beragh GFC, Brockagh GFC, Ballygawley GFC, Brackaville GFC, Carrickmore GFC, Coalisland GFC, Clogher GFC, Clonoe GFC, Drumragh GFC, Derrylaughan GFC, Derrytresk GFC, Donaghmore GFC, Dungannon GFC, Eglishe GFC, Edendork GFC, Eskra GFC, Galbally GFC, Greencastle GFC, Kildress GFC, Killeeshil GFC, Killyclogher GFC, Loughmacrory GFC, Moortown GFC, Moy GFC, Omagh GFC, Pomeroy GFC, Stewartstown GFC, Tattyreagh GFC, Urney GFC.

¹⁶⁶ *Irish News*, 29 November 1980.

Irish News which announced that ‘An urgent meeting of all GAA members who support the 7 hunger strikers and their 5 basic demands will be held in the Lake Glen Hotel on Saturday 22 November.’¹⁶⁷ The *Andersonstown News*, reporting on this 30 November Belfast march, estimated that 20,000 people took part in the march, ‘including 3,000 GAA members’, and, in a two-page spread entitled ‘GAA on the March’, published numerous photographs of GAA banners at the march.¹⁶⁸ An advertisement in the *Fermanagh Herald* for the planned 20 December National Smash H-Block march, in Enniskillen, contained a list of twenty-eight GAA clubs¹⁶⁹ who, in addition to other organisations, had agreed to participate in the march wearing their club colours.¹⁷⁰

The use of GAA grounds for H-Block demonstrations was also a contentious and highly visible symbolic act throughout the hunger strike. From the outset, possibly with the 1977 David Hickey incident and the 1978 and 1979 Casement Park demonstrations in mind, the Coiste Bainistí of the GAA was adamant that no grounds could be used for hunger strike demonstrations. The minutes of 3 November Coiste Bainistí meeting record that the H-Block Committee had accepted that ‘G.A.A. grounds or premises could not be used for protests’, a position which Richard O’Rawe called ‘paradoxical’ and, in reference to the British military occupation of Casement Park and Saint Oliver Plunkett Park, noted that the British Army ‘feels fit to accommodate themselves in G.A.A. grounds whenever the occasion suits.’¹⁷¹

GAA grounds were, however, used for H-Block demonstrations. At 2 November National Football League match between Down and Cork, in Newcastle, over one hundred protestors entered the pitch at the half time interval ‘despite a County Down GAA board ban on an official protest’.¹⁷² After the game a rally was held outside the grounds at which Maura McCrory, mother of a blanket man, called on the GAA to support the demands of the prisoners.¹⁷³ Similarly, at the half time interval of 16 November National Football League, Armagh v Kerry match, in Davitt Park, Lurgan, over 200 protestors entered the pitch, led by seven men dressed in blankets walking in the formation of the letter ‘H’.¹⁷⁴ One of the

¹⁶⁷ *Irish News*, 22 November 1980.

¹⁶⁸ *Andersonstown News*, 6 December 1980.

¹⁶⁹ Bellanaleck, Belcoo, Devenish, Erne Gaels, Derrygonnelly, St. Joseph’s, Ederney, Irvinestown, Coa, Tempo, Enniskillen Gaels, Maguiresbridge, Lisnaskea, Emmets, Roslea, Newtownbutler, Adrumsee, Kinawley, Derrylin, Teemore, St. Patrick’s, Swanlinbar, Templeport, Shannon Gaels, Belturbet, Clones, Fintona, Trillick.

¹⁷⁰ *Fermanagh Herald*, 20 December 1980.

¹⁷¹ Undated Letter from Richard O’Rawe to Antrim County Board, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁷² *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 8 November 1980.

¹⁷³ *Irish News*, 3 November 1980.

¹⁷⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 22 November 1980.

protestors made a speech, prayers were recited in Irish and ‘with a shout of “victory to the prisoners” the demonstrators quietly left the field.’¹⁷⁵ On the same day, 9,000 protestors marched through Coalisland, Tyrone, ‘to the local G.A.A. pitch...where they listened to speeches by Fermanagh and South Tyrone M.P. Mr. Frank Maguire...Mrs. Bernadette McAliskey, Gerry Adams...and the sister of one of the men on hunger strike, 12-year-old Angela McKearney.’¹⁷⁶ At the 1980 Ulster Senior Club Football Final, between Scotstown (Monaghan) and Saint John’s (Antrim),¹⁷⁷ held at the Athletic Grounds, Armagh, on 23 November, ten men and women dressed in blankets entered the pitch at half time while a spokesman appealed to the 10,000 strong crowd to attend the H-Block demonstration taking place in Armagh that evening,¹⁷⁸ with the march itself commencing from the ‘GAA grounds on the Killylea Road.’¹⁷⁹ At 31 November National Football League match between Fermanagh and Sligo, in Irvinestown, ‘thirty-four young men, most of them wearing football jerseys of South Fermanagh GAA clubs took to the field at the interval...and stood for several minutes in silence. Two men toured the grounds carrying a banner bearing the inscription “Smash H-Blocks”. They then dispersed quietly before the teams had left the dressing rooms for the second half.’¹⁸⁰

It is important to note that the above demonstrations, apart from 16 November Coalisland demonstration, were unofficial incursions and were not sanctioned by the relevant county boards. The *Irish Echo* reported that ‘it would appear that when a local club or county board gets a request for use of GAA grounds they refer the matter to Croke Park. Croke Park has turned down these applications on several occasions recently and the organizers of the H-Block protests have responded by forcing their way in – without much opposition it must be confessed.’¹⁸¹ The Down GAA, when explaining their reason for not allowing a protest to take place within their grounds, released a statement that, in consultation with the Coiste Bainistí, it had been decided that ‘The Association, its property and clubs cannot be used for any purpose contrary to the Charter of the GAA.’¹⁸² It is also evident that the National H-Block Committee were not in full control of every demonstration held in their name. At the meeting between

¹⁷⁵ *Irish Echo*, 22 November 1980.

¹⁷⁶ *Irish News*, 17 November 1980.

¹⁷⁷ One of the St. John’s players, Matt Bradley, had days previously been the target of a sectarian murder bid as he trained with the Bangor soccer club. *Irish News*, 14 November 1980.

¹⁷⁸ *Irish News*, 24 November 1980.

¹⁷⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 24 November 1980.

¹⁸⁰ *Irish News*, 1 December 1980.

¹⁸¹ *Irish Echo*, 6 December 1980.

¹⁸² *Belfast Telegraph*, November 1980.

representatives of the GAA and the National H-Block Committee, Bob Murray told the GAA that he 'regretted' the 'events in Newcastle' and explained that the H-Block Committee in Down had tried to defuse the situation and, furthermore, that he 'had sent two people to Newcastle to stop the demonstration.' Murray, however, further explained that he 'had to intercede with a group in Belfast who wished to carry out an anti-GAA march' and that 'the last thing [the National H-Block Committee] would want would be a confrontation with the GAA.'¹⁸³

Liam Mulvihill, who had become Director General of the GAA in May 1979, in reply to a letter of complaint about the half-time incursion during the Ulster Senior Club Football final wrote 'all our counties were given a directive that this should not be condoned. However, it is not always easy to prevent such incursions as I know from information received from officials in various parts of the Six Counties.'¹⁸⁴ The difficulty in preventing these incursions was explained by Maura McCrory who, when pressed about the 2 November Newcastle incursion, explained that 'all the protestors paid the admission price just like everyone else and they went peacefully onto the field through an existing gap in the wire.'¹⁸⁵ The *Down Recorder*, however, reported that the protestors gained admission to the ground by cutting a hole in the perimeter wire fence.¹⁸⁶

Antrim GAA, on two occasions, cancelled matches due to be held in Casement Park, as demonstrations were planned for the Andersonstown area of Belfast. These matches were cancelled due to the disruption (traffic diversions, parking etc.) the marches would cause, rather than in support of the aim of the marches themselves. All 26 October games under the auspices of the Antrim county board were cancelled as there was a major rally planned (attended by 17,000 people) on the eve of the hunger strike.¹⁸⁷ Antrim and Derry were scheduled to play each other (National Football League, Division Two) in Casement Park on 30 November, but the Antrim county board applied to the GAA Activities Committee for the game to be postponed as there was a major H-Block demonstration scheduled for Andersonstown that day.¹⁸⁸ The Activities Committee, having consulted Patrick McFlynn and Liam Mulvihill, agreed to postpone the match until 8 February 1981, stating that 'Antrim were concerned at the

¹⁸³ Unsigned handwritten notes from the undated meeting between the GAA and National H-Block Committee, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁸⁴ Letter from Liam Mulvihill to complainant, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁸⁵ *Irish News*, 3 November 1980.

¹⁸⁶ *Down Recorder*, 6 November 1980.

¹⁸⁷ *Irish News*, 24 October 1980.

¹⁸⁸ Antrim County Executive minutes, 22 October 1980 and 24 November 1980.

problem that could arise between the protest march and the fixture.¹⁸⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, however, reported that 'In a welcome move the G.A.A. cancelled a match scheduled to take place in Casement Park and allowed marches to rally there instead, and there were large numbers of G.A.A. members actually present at the march.'¹⁹⁰

The hunger strike did not affect county boards outside of Ulster in the same manner as those within the province. A brief analysis of a select few county boards shows that the hunger strike was either not raised or, when raised, the matter was referred to Croke Park for guidance. The hunger strike is not mentioned in three months of county board minutes within the Limerick county board minute book for the period. *The Kerryman* for the period also makes no mention of the Kerry GAA supporting the hunger strike, although Patrick Teahan, President of the Tralee branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), called on the GAA, and other organisations, to join in the planned weekly one-hour work-stoppages in support of the hunger strikes.¹⁹¹ When the Meath Prisoners Action Committee approached the Meath county board to publicly support the hunger strike, Brian Smith, Chairman of the Meath county board, stated that while 'we all deplored what was happening up North, down here he would be slow to ask for a proposition until clarification on the [association's] stand came from Croke Park. He felt if he asked for a proposition he could insult someone of different political views.'¹⁹²

While GAA advertisements were placed exclusively in nationalist newspapers, the unionist community were aware of support within the GAA for the hunger strikes. The *Belfast Telegraph*, when reporting that the 2 November Down demonstration was not sanctioned by the GAA, under the front-page headline 'GAA in H-Block Protest Storm' added that 'various clubs have continued to insert advertisements in newspapers pledging support for the hunger strikers. In today's *Irish News* there were three notices from Gaelic clubs in Antrim, Londonderry and Tyrone.'¹⁹³ Peter Robinson, East Belfast MP and deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), met with Humphrey Atkins on 24 November to discuss the disruption caused by H-Block protests. At this meeting Robinson expressed 'the outrage felt by the law abiding community in Northern Ireland' and, in a reference to the GAA, insisted that, in view of the 'fact that resolutions have come from that organisation and advertisements

¹⁸⁹ *Irish Press*, 28 November 1980.

¹⁹⁰ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 6 December 1980.

¹⁹¹ *The Kerryman*, 28 November 1980.

¹⁹² Meath County Board minutes, 3 November 1980, Meath County Board Minute Book 1978-1982.

¹⁹³ *Belfast Telegraph*, November 1980.

in support of a political status for these prisoners', Atkins 'must stop giving any further grants to that organisation.'¹⁹⁴ Robinson also raised GAA club level support for the hunger strikers in the House of Commons when he stated that it was a 'sad and sorry spectacle' to see GAA flags and banners 'in the forefront of the protest being carried out on behalf of the murderers and gunmen in the Maze prison'. Robinson also referred to the fact that 'advertisements are placed almost every day by that same so-called sporting organisation in support of what some term as the brave men in the Maze prison.'¹⁹⁵

There was also opposition from within the GAA itself to the various forms of support some GAA clubs were giving to the hunger strikers. A 'lifelong supporter of the G.A.A.' wrote to the *Irish News* criticising the 'mess [the GAA] has got itself into over the H-Block issue.' The writer, noting that many clubs had placed advertisements of support, on humanitarian grounds, for the hunger strikers in the press asked 'Since when did the GAA become the spokesman for humanitarian issues?' Highlighting that GAA members were also affected by 'unemployment, poverty and low wages', the writer asked the further question 'if clubs pursue the humanitarian aspect then we should have statements on all of the above pressing social issues. Where will the time be for running the athletic end of the club?' Referring to the postponement of the Antrim v Derry National Football League fixture, the letter-writer commented that 'I am sure the counties and Central Council were acting with the best of motives, however the longer they postpone taking a stance the more intricate and insolvable the problem becomes' and called on the Central Council to issue a 'directive on how clubs might extricate themselves from the present dilemma.'¹⁹⁶

As the hunger strike progressed, the Ulster Council, conscious of the pressures being applied to Ulster clubs, and that some of its clubs were taking a stance that diverged from the official position of the GAA, acted to prevent a split within the province. At their 15 November meeting, the Council requested that all Ulster GAA clubs send pre-prepared telegrams to both the Irish and British governments calling for immediate action to end the hunger strike. The Ulster Council directed county committees to ensure that the clubs 'carry out the suggestions in a dignified and non-provocative way' and supplied the wording of both telegrams: the telegram to the British Prime Minister called on the British government, on humanitarian

¹⁹⁴ *Irish Press*, 25 November 1980.

¹⁹⁵ Peter Robinson speaking in the House of Commons, 10 December 1980. Cronin, Duncan and Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History*, p. 170.

¹⁹⁶ Letter from 'GAA Fan, Newry' in the *Irish News*, 4 December 1980.

grounds, to 'create circumstances which will bring to an end the tragic H-Block hunger strike', while the telegram to Charles Haughey, An Taoiseach, called on the Irish government to 'use all means at its disposal to pressurise the British Government, on humanitarian grounds, to create circumstances which will bring to an end the tragic H-Block hunger strike.'¹⁹⁷ The Ulster Council also requested that an emergency meeting between the nine county chairmen of Ulster and An Coiste Bainistí be held 'to decide on a definite and clearly defined approach to the ever-worsening situation in the Province.'

On 19 November, a GAA delegation consisting of Patrick McFlynn, Liam Mulvihill, Con Murphy, Peter Harte and Crossmaglen Rangers officials Gene Larkin, Jim Hanratt and Gene Duffy met with Brian Lenihan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Leinster House to discuss the ongoing British military occupation of St. Oliver Plunkett Park, Crossmaglen. As the meeting concluded, McFlynn 'referred to the H-Block hunger strike and said that the GAA did not support subversives and recognised the delicate situation.' McFlynn stated that the 'nature of the GAA was such that it was in touch with local people' and that 'Both sides of the community are under pressure and most people are very worried.' McFlynn asked if there was anything that the government could do to help alleviate the problem, to which Lenihan replied that the Irish government had put pressure on the British to find a 'prison clothes formula' but that this had not worked.¹⁹⁸

As a result of McFlynn attending an Ulster Council meeting and being 'lambasted' by the Council and accused of 'sitting on the fence [and] doing nothing',¹⁹⁹ the nine Ulster chairmen were invited to meet the Coiste Bainistí in Croke Park on 22 November 1980. At this special meeting eight of the nine Ulster County Chairmen (the Donegal Chairman did not attend) relayed to the Coiste Bainistí the situation within their respective county. The Cavan and Monaghan Chairmen both indicated that they felt removed from the situation with Philip Brady, Cavan Chairman, stating that 'people [are] totally unaware of the situation existing in the Six Counties.' Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh all expressed dissatisfaction with strength of 8 November Coiste Bainistí statement, with feelings ranging from 'felt the statement could have been a wee bit stronger' (Fermanagh) to 'totally dissatisfied with the statement from Management Committee' (Tyrone). J. Williamson, Chairman of the Down

¹⁹⁷ Letter from Michael Feeney, Secretary of the Ulster Council to GAA Headquarters, 16 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁹⁸ Minutes of the meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and GAA delegation, 19 November 1980. DFA/2011/39/1787.

¹⁹⁹ MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles*, p. 11.

county board, stressed that clubs were coming under ‘undue pressure from certain sources’ and warned that ‘there is a danger of the Association losing control’ and a ‘grave danger of a split within clubs.’²⁰⁰ In contrast, however, John O’Reilly, Chairman of the Armagh county board, reported that there was ‘good unity in the clubs and the H-Block Committee see them as friends’.²⁰¹ John Tracey (Sean O’Treasaigh), Chairman of the Tyrone county board, informed the meeting that there was a ‘strong feeling that the GAA itself should organise a demonstration of support for the prisoners’ and expressed dissatisfaction with the directions on use of grounds, stating that ‘grounds in Coalisland [were] used because they felt it was the responsible thing to do.’²⁰² This stance was backed by Hugh McPoland (Aodh Mac Póilíni), Chairman of the Antrim county board, who ‘suggested either an Ulster demonstration or county demonstration...[he] felt that at least grounds should be made available for open air masses to show the people that we are concerned about (a) the H-Block (b) the hunger strikers (c) our own community.’²⁰³

In response to this meeting, the Coiste Bainistí agreed to draft and release a new statement which read

Because of the Gaelic Athletic Association’s concern, on humanitarian grounds, for the Long Kesh prisoners and their relatives and the tragic consequences that could arise if the hunger strikers situation is not speedily resolved, a meeting of representatives of the Management Committee and Chairmen of the Ulster counties was held in Croke Park on Saturday last.

The Association calls on the British Government to take immediate steps to afford normal decent standards and humane treatment to the prisoners, to relieve further distress for their relatives and, in the interest of peace, bring the whole sad situation to an end.

It was acknowledged at the meeting that any genuine peaceful efforts to resolve the situation and bring the continuing spiral of violence to an end is worthy of the support of all G.A.A. units.²⁰⁴

When viewed against the previous 8 November statement, the 4 December statement appears more forthright in its assertions. Instead of the irresolute request that ‘every effort should be made to find a solution’ the GAA directly called on the British government to ‘afford normal

²⁰⁰ Handwritten notes from the meeting between the Ulster Chairmen and An Coiste Bainistí, 22 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁰¹ Handwritten notes from the meeting between the Ulster Chairmen and An Coiste Bainistí, 22 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁰² Handwritten notes from the meeting between the Ulster Chairmen and An Coiste Bainistí, 22 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁰³ Handwritten notes from the meeting between the Ulster Chairmen and An Coiste Bainistí, 22 November 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁰⁴ GAA Press Release, 4 December 1980, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

decent standards and humane treatment to the prisoners.’ The last line of the statement also opened up the possibility of GAA clubs officially taking part in demonstrations, so long as they were ‘genuinely peaceful’. The Antrim county board issued a press release in which it expressed ‘total agreement’ with the 4 December statement, adding that ‘We confirm our support for the principles embodied in the 5 demands of the prisoners on hunger strike and call on the British Government and Northern Ireland Office to immediately introduce the necessary reforms.’²⁰⁵ Similarly, the Tyrone county board, which had been the most critical of 8 November statement, released their own statement expressing ‘total agreement with the sentiments’ contained within 4 December statement, adding that the county board considered the hunger strike as ‘above party politics and can therefore be supported by all our members’ and recommending that all Tyrone clubs ‘support those who are working in a peaceful and dignified way to win decent standards of treatment for our fellow countrymen and women in Long Kesh and in Armagh.’²⁰⁶

While the republican movement welcomed the GAA statement, in particular the Tyrone and Antrim statements,²⁰⁷ the apparent support for the prisoners was criticised by sections of the media. On 5 December, the GAA statement appeared on the front pages of the *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent*, both of which interpreted the statement as GAA support for the demands of the hunger strikers. The *Irish Independent* was particularly negative in its reporting of the statement. It gave prominence to the position of John O’Grady (described by the newspaper as ‘a member of the hardcore group within the G.A.A. totally opposed to the Association becoming involved in the H-Block issue’) who accused the GAA of succumbing to pressure from subversive groups. O’Grady called the release of the statement ‘shameful’ and accused the GAA of releasing the statement without having the mandate of the association.²⁰⁸ Patrick McFlynn, in the same article, insisted that the association was not responding to threats or pressure but that he had travelled extensively throughout the country and ‘knew the mood in the various counties.’ McFlynn added that he ‘was convinced that there was nothing in the statement as framed that would lead to any outcry from the county boards.’²⁰⁹ The *Irish Independent*, for their own part, claimed that the statement was under ‘close scrutiny by the rank-and-file Gardaí who have had a running battle with the GAA over its ambiguous attitude

²⁰⁵ Antrim County Board Press Release, H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁰⁶ *Ulster Herald*, 29 November 1980.

²⁰⁷ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 December 1980.

²⁰⁸ *Irish Independent*, 5 December 1980.

²⁰⁹ *Irish Independent*, 5 December 1980.

to the Provos and the failure to condemn outright the murders of three Gardaí', and added that 'a real test for Mr McFlynn and the Association and the Association Officers will come on Saturday when the Central Council meets at Croke Park.'²¹⁰

The Central Council, at their 6 December meeting - their first meeting since the 1980 hunger strike began - discussed the 'recent Garda allegations and H-Block controversy' and congratulated the Coiste Bainistí on their handling of both affairs.²¹¹ Turning their attention to media coverage of the affairs, Father Leo Ó Móracháin (Leo Morahan), Mayo county board representative, assured the meeting that he had been completely misrepresented by the *Irish Independent*, who had reported that he feared the 4 December Coiste Bainistí statement could be 'misconstrued by certain people who would use it to their advantage', and that he had tried, without success, to get the *Irish Independent* to issue a clarification.²¹² Donal Ó Faoláin urged caution when dealing with the media, stating that the 'media always go to the people who are un-representative.'

When the hunger strike ended, on 18 December, the National H-Block Committee issued a press release 'saluting the thousands of people who flocked to the banner of the hunger strikers', adding that the 'strength of a roused people was demonstrated on the streets, in offices and on factory floors.'²¹³ In retrospect, the 1980 hunger strike, in many ways, is considered a 'trial run' for the 1981 hunger strike – the republican prisoners learned from the mistakes of the 1980 strike, in particular the weakness of a mass hunger strike, and applied these lessons to the 1981 hunger strike. The GAA also learned a number of lessons during the 1980 strike, in particular that its broadly nationalist, but strictly non-political, stance was wholly inadequate and unenforceable in hunger strike Northern Ireland. From the outbreak of the Troubles, the GAA, at Central Council and Ulster Provincial levels, fought hard to keep the association independent of the day-to-day politics of Northern Ireland, but an event as cataclysmic as a hunger strike, with three of the seven hunger strikers members of the GAA, saw GAA members and clubs openly challenge, and change, the official position of the association. In a 13 December 1980 interview with *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, on the mobilisation of H-Block support, Gerry Adams, vice-president of Sinn Féin, suggested that the 'five main bodies' (the Catholic church, the GAA, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Social Democratic and

²¹⁰ *Irish Independent*, 5 December 1980.

²¹¹ Central Council minutes, 6 December 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 245.

²¹² Central Council minutes, 6 December 1980, CCMB 1980, p. 246.

²¹³ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 103.

Labour Party (SDLP) and Fianna Fáil) supported the prisoners demands but could not, for their own reasons, come out and publicly state this. Adams, however, commented that

The movement of ordinary people, especially in the Six Counties, has pushed the Catholic church, the G.A.A. and public representatives to take up the gauntlet to some extent, and the manner in which the support has narrowed into support for the prisoners five demands as a package, and not just in a wishy-washy way ('we sympathise with the prisoners') has been particularly significant.²¹⁴

However, on occasions, the views of the 'ordinary' members of the GAA were misrepresented as the official position of the association. At the 6 December H-Block march in Dublin, Joe Keohane,²¹⁵ Kerry GAA, told the crowd that 'the ideals and aspirations of the GAA are synonymous with our national ideals – namely a free, Gaelic united Ireland.' Keohane further listed 'a number of players and GAA figures who had asked him to speak on their behalf also, including such household names as Jimmy Keaveney of Dublin and Mikey Sheehy of Kerry.'²¹⁶ While *An Phoblacht/Republican News* made it clear that Keohane was speaking in a personal capacity, other newspapers presented his speech as the official position of the association. The *Sunday Independent*, on its front page story, and under the headline 'Gardai stoned by H-Block Marchers', reported that 'speaking on behalf of the G.A.A. Mr Joe Keohane called on the British Government to abandon their stand on the issue.'²¹⁷

VI.

The months between the two hunger strikes, December 1980 to March 1981, is traditionally the period during which GAA county boards and provincial councils hold their annual conventions, at which the year gone by is reviewed, motions are submitted and debated, and agendas set for the forthcoming year. An examination of county and provincial secretary's reports submitted to their respective conventions, the motions submitted to these conventions, and chairmen's addresses give a good understanding of the feeling of the GAA throughout Ireland at this particular time. Before the first county convention was held, Tom Woulfe wrote

²¹⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 December 1980.

²¹⁵ Joe Keohane won five All-Ireland football medals with Kerry between 1937 and 1947 and is regarded as one of the greatest full-backs of all time. In 1969 he was a defeated candidate for a Fianna Fail nomination in the 1969 general election; following the arms crisis and split in Fianna Fail, Keohane contested the 1973 for the Aontacht Eireann party (formed by ex-Fianna Fail Minister for Defence, Kevin Boland) receiving 695 votes. *The Kerryman*, 8 January 1988. Following his death, in January 1988, Martin Ferris, a republican prisoner in Portlaoise Prison, issued a glowing tribute to Keohane which included 'From a Republican perspective the enormity of his contribution for the present will have to remain unwritten, but when the time comes to record the deeds of those who have helped in finally securing Irish Freedom, the name of Joe Keohane will figure prominently.' *The Kerryman*, 15 January 1988.

²¹⁶ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 December 1980.

²¹⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 7 December 1980.

a lengthy article, entitled 'Garda Row: What the GAA Should Do', in the 14 November 1980 edition of the *Irish Press*. In this article, Woulfe explained the significance of the 1979 change to Rule 7 and stated that 'the seeds of the problem confronting the G.A.A. today were nurtured by the 1979 diversion. Here, surely, one witnessed the emergence of a politically orientated G.A.A. with the emphasis on extremism.' Woulfe, recalling the row between the GAA and the GRA, stated that while the GAA's 'unequivocal and repeated' condemnations of violence were welcome, 'something more substantial and sustained' was required. Woulfe stated that he would like to see 'motions condemning violence on the agenda of every county convention', with the matter then raised at the Annual Congress.²¹⁸

At the Dublin county convention, held on 4 January 1981, the Civil Service motion 'Whereas the Association commits itself to support the national aim of political unity by peaceful means, it emphatically rejects and unequivocally condemns violence to support that aim' was defeated by 100 votes to 98. Following the vote, Woulfe told RTÉ radio that former GAA presidents, Pat Fanning and Con Murphy, had, through the introduction of the 1979 non-party-politics rule, allowed the association 'to drift into politics and [led] it into sympathising with the men of violence.' Fanning replied that the comment was 'so silly it does not warrant comment', while Murphy said he was 'deeply offended by such malicious statements.'²¹⁹ Jack Marrinan, secretary of the GRA, also criticised the defeat of the motion, informing the *Irish Independent* that he had expected the Dublin motion to be passed at the Dublin convention, and subsequently forwarded to the GAA Annual Congress, at which the association could 'copper-fasten' its opposition to violence.²²⁰ The republican movement, unsurprisingly, welcomed the Dublin vote stating that 'attempts by anti-nationalists in the GAA to use the association against the freedom struggle in the North, received a severe rebuff...Such nationalist expressions in Dublin would certainly indicate that any other such motions around the country stand no chance whatsoever. The gut reaction of the GAA members continues to be sound.'²²¹

Throughout the remaining counties of Leinster, Connacht and Munster, the issue of the GAA's attitude towards republican violence was raised at the Kilkenny,²²² Kildare,²²³

²¹⁸ *Irish Press*, 14 November 1980.

²¹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 6 January 1981.

²²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 6 January 1981.

²²¹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 10 January 1981.

²²² *Kilkenny People*, 30 January 1981.

²²³ *Irish Independent*, 26 January 1981.

Wexford,²²⁴ Mayo,²²⁵ Galway,²²⁶ Leitrim,²²⁷ Roscommon,²²⁸ Sligo,²²⁹ Cork and Limerick²³⁰ county conventions. At each of these conventions, it was the issue of republican violence that was raised with only the Cork county board directly referring to the H-Blocks. The Cork secretary, Frank Murphy, in his report to the county convention, stated that motions relating to prison conditions that had appeared on Annual Congress agendas had 'carefully and unequivocally stated that this concern has been based on humanitarian grounds solely. The major religious leaders in this country have expressed similar concern. Where lies the difference?'²³¹

Within Ulster, the related issues of the H-Blocks and the GAA's attitude to republican violence were raised at only three county conventions; Donegal, Fermanagh and Armagh. While the H-Blocks or republican violence was not mentioned in the Donegal secretary's report, nor were there any related motions on the agenda, the county chairman, Michael Gillespie, told the convention that the 'official position of the Donegal organisation was that they were totally against violence, no matter by whom or against whom it is perpetrated.'²³² A Derrylin sponsored motion appeared on the agenda for the Fermanagh county convention calling on GAA members to boycott the *Irish Independent* 'in view of that newspaper's recent policy of bringing the Association into disrepute by attempting to link it with violent and subversive activity'.²³³ At the convention itself, while there 'was support for the principle of a boycott, it was...felt that such a boycott would be unworkable' with the Derrylin representative, Martin McBrien, agreeing to allow the motion to be amended at a later date 'to take account of what was felt to be a general hostile attitude by sections of the daily press towards the Association.'²³⁴ At the Armagh county convention, held on 21 December 1980, two motions calling for the convention to 'express concern at the plight of the prisoners in H-Block' and that the Armagh county board should 'fully support the demands of the hunger strikers and publicly advertise their support' appeared on the agenda, but these motions were submitted, by Clan Eireann and Saint Killians respectively, before the hunger strike ended on 18 December

²²⁴ *Irish Independent*, 26 January 1981.

²²⁵ *Connacht Telegraph*, 14 January 1981.

²²⁶ *Connacht Sentinel*, 20 January 1981.

²²⁷ *Leitrim Observer*, 7 February 1981.

²²⁸ *Irish Independent*, 19 January 1981.

²²⁹ *Irish Independent*, 26 January 1981.

²³⁰ Munster Provincial Convention minutes, 7 March 1981.

²³¹ Secretary's report to the 1981 Cork Annual Convention, p. 3.

²³² *Derry Journal*, 23 January 1981.

²³³ *Fermanagh Herald*, 24 January 1981.

²³⁴ *Fermanagh Herald*, 14 February 1981.

1980. The Armagh secretary, Gearoid Ó Fagain, did not refer to the matter in his report.²³⁵ Pat O'Neill, secretary of the South Antrim Divisional Board, referred directly to GAA involvement in the H-Blocks crisis in his annual report to the South Antrim Convention, held on 14 December 1980. O'Neill asked 'What are we afraid of? We have given leadership to the G.A.A. in many areas before. We owe it to the large number of G.A.A. personnel on the blanket to be seen to support their struggle.' While O'Neill observed that 'Much work has been done by individual clubs in the South Antrim area' he argued that 'as a county we could, and should, be doing more'.²³⁶ Despite this, the issue was not raised in the Antrim secretary's (Al McMurray) report nor at the Antrim county convention, held on 25 January 1981.²³⁷

In his secretary's report to the Ulster Convention, Michael Feeney (Micheal Ó Feinneadha) stated that the Ulster Council, throughout the latter half of 1980, had to suspend 'normal activities' and adopt 'a defensive role to ward-off unsubstantiated and unjustifiable attacks both from publicity seeking obscure "officials" within the G.A.A. and from others outside who for their own political or other reasons feel that the Association, because of its Gaelic traditions, and commitment to a Gaelic Ireland, should be vilified on every occasion possible.' Feeney further stated that, despite being subjected to 'physical, psychological and political violence over the years', the GAA in Ulster has 'consistently counselled calmness and moderation.' Feeney, noting that the Ulster GAA 'condemned violence from every source' argued that the 'mindless and totally unjustified allegations' that the GAA supported republican violence 'place at risk the lives of many of our members'.²³⁸ At the provincial convention itself, held on 1 March 1981, the Armagh motion (the only violence / H-Block related motion on the agenda) 'That this Convention express concern at the plight of the prisoners in H-Block and fully supports their demands on humanitarian grounds' was passed.

As can be seen, the related issues of the H-Blocks and the GAA's attitude to republican violence were only raised by fourteen county boards and two provincial councils. Tellingly, however, conditions within the H-Blocks were only raised by two county boards (Cork and Armagh) and one provincial council – the Ulster Council. Of the county boards and provincial councils that raised the two matters, the vast majority were more concerned with publicly clarifying that the GAA, whilst nationalist in outlook, condemned republican violence. At

²³⁵ Secretary's Report to the 1980 Armagh County Convention, Newry, 21 December 1980.

²³⁶ *Irish News*, 11 December 1980.

²³⁷ *Irish News*, 20 January 1981 & 26 January 1981.

²³⁸ Secretary's Report to the 1981 Ulster Provincial Convention.

national level, members of the two management committees were more concerned with the day-to-day running of association, with the H-Blocks only raised on a small number of occasions. Between 1976 and 1980 (inclusive) the Coiste Bainistí of the GAA met on 70 occasions, while the Central Council met on 23 occasions. Throughout this entire period the H-Blocks were only discussed at seven meetings while the wider issue of republican violence was only discussed at three meetings.

The murder of the three Gardaí in 1980, and the resultant dispute that arose between the GAA and the GRA, brought the issue of the GAA's attitude to republican violence to the fore and overshadowed any concerns that association units and members had for the prisoners in the H-Blocks. While the 1980 hunger strike saw the mobilisation of some GAA units at local levels in Northern Ireland, there was very limited overt support for the hunger strikers from GAA units in the Republic of Ireland. As shall be discussed fully in later chapters, the H-Blocks crisis marked the first regional crisis the GAA faced, and showed for the first time how the association was divided by the border. Crucially, Rule 7 had been amended in March 1979 to allow all GAA units and representatives to participate in political matters, so long as these matters were not party-political: this however, was to have serious ramifications for the GAA during the 1981 hunger strike, when the National H-Block Committee decided to stand candidates in elections in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Chapter Three: 1981

The 1981 hunger strike began on 1 March and lasted until 3 October when the republican prisoners, conscious that their families would intervene to save their lives, ended the protest. During this period a total of twenty-three republican prisoners¹ embarked on a hunger strike. There were approximately 420 protesting republican prisoners in the H-Blocks at the beginning of this period,² 104 of whom were members of the GAA.³ The protesting prisoners ended the 'no wash' and 'dirty' protests on 2 March, as they wanted to focus the world's attention on the hunger strike. Ten hunger strikers died between 5 May and 20 August – Bobby Sands (5 May), Francis Hughes (12 May), Raymond McCreesh (21 May), Patsy O'Hara (21 May), Joe McDonnell (8 July), Martin Hurson (13 July), Kevin Lynch (1 August), Kieran Doherty (2 August), Thomas McElwee (8 August) and Michael Devine (20 August). As shall be discussed, five of the men who died on hunger strike were, at one time, GAA members – McCreesh (Carrickcruppen GAA), McDonnell (St. Teresa's GFC), Hurson (Galbally Pearses), Lynch (St. Patrick's Hurling Club) and Doherty (St. Teresa's GFC). Two of these five, Lynch and Doherty, were very active members of the GAA.

This chapter will address how the GAA reacted to the 1981 hunger strike, and how the hunger strike affected the GAA. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section will detail the events that took place within the H-Blocks during the period October 1980 – March 1981, which led to the commencement of the hunger strike. The actions of the National H-Block Committee and Sinn Féin during this period will be briefly discussed, as will the limited support that some GAA clubs gave to the prisoners during the period. The second section will detail how the GAA reacted to the early stage of the hunger strike, 1 March – 29 May. This section will provide further detail on those on hunger strike who were GAA members and question how the various GAA units, clubs and county boards in Northern Ireland in particular, reacted to the commencement of the hunger strike. This section will further ask how the GAA reacted to the deaths of the first four hunger strikers, who died during this period, with the resultant row between the GAA and the GRA explored in the context of the GAA's overall

¹ Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh, Patsy O'Hara, Joe McDonnell, Brendan McLoughlin, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, Paddy Quinn, Michael Devine, Laurence McKeown, Patrick McGeown, Pat Devlin, Liam McCloskey, Patrick Sheehan, Jackie McMullan, Bernard Fox, Hugh Carville, John Pickering, Gerard Hodgkins, James Devine.

² *Ulster Herald*, 8 August 1981.

³ *Irish Press*, 30 July 1981.

attitude to republican violence. This section will also detail the involvement of some GAA members and clubs in the election campaign of Bobby Sands, and question if such involvement was in breach of the GAA's 'non-party-political rule'. The third section of this chapter will detail the actions of the GAA during the latter stage of the hunger strike, 29 May – 3 October. The reaction of the GAA during this period will be explored in the context of a directive that was issued to GAA county boards by Liam Mulvihill, in response to the 29 May announcement that the National H-Block Committee were entering candidates in the June 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland. This directive was interpreted by many as a total ban on GAA support for the hunger strikers. This section will focus on the debate that took place within the GAA as to the appropriate level of support the association could lend to the prisoners, by comparing and contrasting Mulvihill's directive with correspondence from ten Tyrone clubs who sought more GAA support for the prisoners. This section will also explore how the GAA reacted to the deaths of the final six hunger strikers, and the association's reaction to the conclusion of the hunger strike itself. The final section of this chapter will analyse the proceedings of the county and provincial conventions, and the 1982 Annual Congress, to ascertain if the hunger strike affected the association as a whole or if its effects were felt by individual units of the association.

I.

This section will focus on the period between the ending of the 1980 hunger strike, 18 December 1980, and the start of the 1981 hunger strike, 1 March 1981. This section addresses what happened within the H-Blocks that led the republican prisoners to decide to embark upon another hunger strike, asks how Sinn Féin and the National H-Block Committee reacted to events taking place within the H-Blocks, and, finally, it explores the reaction of the GAA to the build-up to the 1981 hunger strike.

The period between the end of the first hunger strike and the beginning of the second hunger strike has been termed, by Brian Campbell in *Nor Meekly Serve my Time, The H Block Struggle 1976-1981*, as one of 'Confusion, Frustration, Determination'. In the immediate aftermath of the first hunger strike there was some optimism amongst the prisoners that a settlement could be reached to end the prison protests. Within a short space of time, however, the republican prisoners realised that the negotiations between the prisoners' leadership and the prison administration were not going to result in the prisoners receiving their 'five demands'. Throughout January 1981 a 'step-by-step' process was attempted to end the 'dirty'

and ‘no-wash’ protests. This ‘step-by-step’ process began when sixty republican prisoners were transferred to clean and furnished cells, on the understanding that the prisoners would not dirty their cells. On 22 January the republican prisoners released a statement that they had decided to ‘pilot a scheme’ whereby twenty prisoners, who were in clean and furnished cells, would wash and shave, with the expectation that they would then be given their own clothes and classed as ‘non-protesting prisoners.’⁴

According to Jaz McCann, however, when the twenty prisoners washed, shaved, cut their hair and prepared for work the ‘reception from the governor was not what was expected. He said that he would decide what type of work they would do, and that if they did not conform to prison rules, they would be moved into the work Blocks. He refused to issue them with their personal clothing until they fully conformed.’ This, according to McCann, was the end of diplomacy – the prisoners were ordered to smash their cells, and they did so ‘with a vengeance.’⁵ Hennessey, however, has shown that the situation was somewhat more complicated, insofar as the British government had to consider the prisoners’ request for their own clothes in the context of the government’s stated policy of there being no special regime for any prisoners, while the request was also made against the backdrop of IRA killings of Ivan Toombs, Christopher Shenton and Norman and James Stronge.⁶ Bik McFarlane stated that the refusal to issue the prisoners with their own clothes ended the period of confusion: the republican prisoners knew that a new hunger strike was the ‘only course’ to take.⁷ A joint statement from the H-Block and Armagh republican prisoners was released on 5 February announcing that a new hunger strike would begin, in both prisons, on 1 March – the fifth anniversary of the withdrawal of political status from paramilitary prisoners.

Outside the prison, the National H-Block Committee and Sinn Féin spent the period immediately after the ending of the first hunger strike preparing the public for the possibility of another hunger strike. Both organisations sought to keep public attention focused on the situation within the H-Blocks. The National H-Block Committee held a conference on 25 January 1981, at which Piaras Ó Dúill, in his chairman’s address, highlighted many of the previous campaign’s strengths but acknowledged that the ‘campaign needed to broaden its base and that it had yet to gain the support of the “higher echelons [of the political parties], especially

⁴ *Irish News*, 23 January 1981.

⁵ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, pp. 136-137.

⁶ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, pp. 125-59.

⁷ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 139.

in the south.’⁸ At this conference the National H-Block Committee agreed that more conferences and marches would be organised and ‘activists were asked to put pressure on those who called on the prisoners to end their hunger strike to now publicly call on Britain to honour the [supposed 1980] agreement or to publicly state their support for the prisoners’ 5 just and reasonable demands.’⁹ Sinn Féin, having been ‘tactically, strategically, physically and morally opposed to the hunger strike’,¹⁰ held their own internal party conference on 15 February 1981, at which the party pledged full support to the H-Block prisoners, agreed to fully co-operate with the National H-Block Committee and to pursue the strategy of lobbying ‘local government representatives throughout Ireland...trade unionists, cultural and sporting bodies, students, youth and women’s groups.’¹¹

During the period between the two hunger strikes, the Coiste Bainistí of the GAA met on one occasion only, 31 January 1981, and the issue of the H-Blocks was not raised at this meeting.¹² At a local level, however, the build-up to the 1981 hunger strike affected clubs in the same manner (although nowhere near the same extent) as the 1980 hunger strike. At the National Football League game between Antrim and Derry, in Corrigan Park, Belfast on 8 February, representatives of various Belfast GAA clubs, wearing their club jerseys, took part in a half time demonstration, organised by ‘Gael Against H-Block/Armagh’, which, according to *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, was ‘warmly cheered’ by the ‘several-hundred-strong crowd.’¹³ At the 16 February Antrim county board meeting, Pat O’Neill, South Antrim delegate, suggested that the county board should ‘re-iterate the previous sentiment expressed reference [sic] H-Block and the hunger strikers’ but the county chairman, Hugh Mc Poland, deferred the matter to a future meeting.¹⁴ While advertisements in support of the protesting prisoners re-appeared in the *Irish News* from mid-January 1981 onwards, in the two months leading up to the second hunger strike only one GAA club, Ard Eoin (Belfast) placed such an advertisement.¹⁵

While the 1981 hunger strike was widely expected, the build up to the hunger strike was not marked with the same level of protest activity as the periods during which the two

⁸ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 112.

⁹ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 113.

¹⁰ O’Malley, *Biting at the Grave*, p. 72.

¹¹ *Irish Press*, 16 February 1981.

¹² Coiste Bainistí meeting minutes, 31 January 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 1), pp. 3-15.

¹³ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 14 February 1981.

¹⁴ Antrim County Board minutes, 16 February 1981.

¹⁵ *Irish News*, 26 February 1981.

hunger strikes were ongoing. Campbell wrote that at the outset of the 1981 hunger strike, 'public support proved difficult to harness...[as]...many were exhausted after the strain of the first hunger strike and disillusioned at its inconclusive ending.'¹⁶ This was particularly true for the GAA. While there were some tangible signs of support for the prisoners from some GAA clubs, it was not until the hunger strike itself began that the issue affected the GAA in a meaningful manner.

II.

This section will focus on how the GAA, at all levels, responded to early stage of the 1981 hunger strike, between 1 March, the starting date of the hunger strike, and 29 May, when the National H-Block Committee announced that nine prisoners were contesting the 11 June general election in the Republic of Ireland. This decision by the National H-Block Committee, which was interpreted by some as a party-political act, had serious ramifications for the GAA's response to the hunger strike. During the period 1 March – 29 May, four hunger strikers died in relatively quick succession - Bobby Sands (5 May), Frances Hughes (12 May), Raymond McCreesh (21 May) and Patsy O'Hara (21 May). Furthermore, on 10 April Bobby Sands was elected as the MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone. This section will ask how many hunger strikers were members of the GAA; it will assess how the GAA reacted to the outbreak and early stages of the hunger strike; it will outline the reaction of the GAA to the deaths of the four hunger strikers; it will discuss the row that temporarily reignited between the GAA and the GRA and, finally, it will explore the GAA's reaction to and involvement in the by-election campaign of Bobby Sands in Fermanagh/South Tyrone.

Similar to the 1980 hunger strike, the aim of the 1981 hunger strike was to focus attention on the cause of the prisoners in the H-Blocks and generate national and international support for the prisoners' 'five demands'.¹⁷ The prisoners 'launched into a massive letter-writing campaign trying to exert even more pressure on Thatcher's government to adopt a flexible approach and resolve the crisis.'¹⁸ Again, the republican movement contacted various social, cultural and labour organisations, requesting that these organisations publicly declare their support for the hunger strikers. As the hunger strike began, *An Phoblacht/Republican*

¹⁶ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p.146.

¹⁷ The five demands of the republican prisoners can be summarised as 1) the right not to wear a prison uniform, 2) the right not to do prison work, 3) the right of free association with other prisoners and to organise educational and recreational pursuits, 4) the right to one visit, one letter and one parcel per week and 5) full restoration of remission lost through protest.

¹⁸ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, p. 152.

News, in a direct criticism of the SDLP and Fianna Fáil, stated that ‘a public expression of concern is worth more than a thousand private pleas.’¹⁹

The GAA was one of the organisations that the republican movement contacted, requesting that it publicly declare its support for the prisoners’ demands. This happened at local and national level. Seven republican prisoners from Tyrone²⁰ issued a ‘Plea to G.A.A. Clubs’, which was published in the *Fermanagh News* and the *Dungannon Observer* on 28 March, in which the prisoners stated that they needed ‘the help of G.A.A. clubs to save the lives’ of the hunger strikers and that it was ‘crucial that G.A.A. members fully support the marches and protest now, and in the coming days and weeks.’ The prisoners argued that the help of the GAA could ‘save the life of a hunger striker’ but warned that ‘by complacency you could do the opposite.’ The prisoners suggested that all GAA clubs should ‘hold emergency meetings now and...instruct all players and supporters to rally behind the H-Block demands.’ The prisoners also asked the clubs to ‘put pressure on their respective county boards to speak out in a more forth-right manner than before.’ At county board level, the Armagh²¹ and Kilkenny²² county boards were amongst those that received correspondence from the prisoners. At national level, republican prisoner, Lorcán Mac Eoin (Laurence McKeown), wrote a letter, entirely in Irish, to the GAA, urging the association to ‘make an effort to help [Bobby Sands] survive, speak out publicly and loudly.’²³ The protesting female republican prisoners in Armagh Jail also wrote a letter to the leadership of the GAA in which they thanked the association for its ‘past efforts and achievements during the last hunger strike’ and asked the association to ‘renew and greatly intensify all past efforts.’²⁴

When the republican movement and the National H-Block Committee approached the GAA, both groups highlighted that many of those imprisoned in the H-Blocks, including those participating in the hunger strike, were members of the GAA. By highlighting that members of the GAA were imprisoned in the H-Blocks, both groups were attempting to persuade the GAA to publicly support the prisoners’ plight. The protesting female prisoners in Armagh Jail wrote that ‘many of the young men and women suffering in Britain’s hell holes were once deeply involved and attached to the Gaelic Association [sic] and would be so today but for the war

¹⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 14 March 1981.

²⁰ Pat Mullan, Peter Kane, Matt Devlin, Aidan Slane, Ciaran O’Donnell, Joe McNulty and Denis Cummings.

²¹ Armagh county board minutes, 13 April 1981, Armagh County Board Minute Book, 1978-1988.

²² *Kilkenny People*, 12 June 1981.

²³ Letter from Lorcán Mac Eoin to the GAA, 4 April 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

²⁴ Undated letter from the ‘Protesting Prisoners in Armagh Jail’ to the GAA. Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

situation in our country.’²⁵ At the GAA’s 1981 Annual Congress, held on 28/29 March, H-Block activists picketed delegates attending the congress, displayed a large banner across the hotel entrance and handed out lists of GAA members imprisoned in the H-Blocks.²⁶

From the sources available, it can be ascertained that nine of the twenty-three men who participated in the hunger strike were members of the GAA, at club and county level, while fourteen men who participated in the hunger strike had no connection with the GAA. The main source of biographical information on those who took part in the 1981 hunger strike are the ‘Portrait of a Hunger Striker’ features that were published in *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, during the course of the strike. Unfortunately, however, a ‘Portrait’ does not exist for each of the twenty-three men. As the republican movement was actively promoting the fact that many of the prisoners were members of the GAA, it is highly unlikely that any GAA membership would have been omitted from these ‘Portraits’. It is, however, possible that the hunger strikers GAA activities were exaggerated by the newspaper, in an attempt pressurise the GAA to publicly support the hunger strikes. From the various sources, it can be ascertained that Kevin Lynch (Saint Patrick’s GAA, Derry),²⁷ Raymond McCreesh (Carrickcruppen GFC, Armagh), Kieran Doherty (St. Theresa’s GAC and Antrim Minor Football Team), Matt Devlin (Ardboe GFC, Tyrone), Pat Sheehan (St. Gall’s GAC, Antrim), Paddy Quinn (Whitecross, Armagh) and Gerry (Hugh) Carville (Greencastle GFC and Down Minor Football Team)²⁸ were members of the GAA. While the vast majority of the literature from the time of the hunger strike does not mention if Joe McDonnell and Martin Hurson were members of the GAA, later literature, and commemorative events, indicate that the two men were, in fact, members of the association – McDonnell belonged to St Teresa’s (Belfast)²⁹ and Hurson played with Galbally Pearses (Tyrone).³⁰ From all of the available sources, and interviews carried out for this research, it seems certain that the remaining fourteen hunger strikers were not members of the GAA.

²⁵ Undated letter from the ‘Protesting Prisoners in Armagh Jail’ to the GAA. Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linen Hall Library.

²⁶ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 4 April 1981.

²⁷ Aidan Hegarty, *Kevin Lynch and the Irish Hunger Strike* (Camlane Press, 2006), pp. 75-79.

²⁸ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 16 May 1981, 4 July 1981, 1 August 1981, 29 August 1981, 5 September 1981 & 12 September 1981.

²⁹ While the 27 June 1981 edition of *An Phoblacht/Republican News* stated that Joe McDonnell’s ‘great love and ability was sport. He was a good gaelic football player’, the biography does not mention if McDonnell belonged to a GAA club. Throughout the hunger strike no GAA club, including St Teresa’s GFC, published an advertisement of support for Joe McDonnell, but, in 1998, St. Teresa’s GFC named their pitch ‘Mc Donnell / Doherty Park’ in honour of their two former members, Joe McDonnell and Kieran Doherty

³⁰ There is no mention of Martin Hurson being a member of the GAA in the ‘Portrait of a Hunger Striker’ focusing on Hurson, published in *An Phoblacht/Republican News* on 11 July 1981, and no GAA club placed an advertisement in support of him throughout his hunger strike. At his funeral, however, Seán Lynch, in

During the period 1 March and 29 May GAA units, clubs and county boards in particular, reacted to the commencement and progress of the hunger strike in a number of ways. GAA clubs placed notices of support for the prisoners in the *Irish News*, several GAA clubs took an active role in H-Block marches and demonstrations, with some of these H-Block demonstrations taking place on GAA grounds, while a limited number of clubs withdrew from their respective competitions.

As with the 1980 hunger strike, some GAA clubs placed notices of concern and support for the H-Block prisoners in the nationalist press, although during this period the notices were predominantly confined to the *Irish News*. While the advertisements were similar in nature, three distinct themes can be discerned. Some clubs placed advertisements in the newspaper specifically mentioning a prisoner from the club's locality;³¹ other clubs placed notices in the newspaper calling for a solution to be found on humanitarian grounds;³² while other clubs placed notices declaring their full support for the prisoners and their demands for political status.³³

At the 12 March National H-Block Committee conference, Bernadette McAliskey outlined that the strategy to be pursued by the committee included a series of street demonstrations, with an 'Industrial Day of Action' planned for 15 April and a national rally in Dublin on 18 April.³⁴ The National H-Block Committee, according to Patrick McFlynn, GAA president during the period 1979-1982, recognised that the GAA was a 'ready organised group in the parish' and that convincing the GAA clubs to take part in the H-Block marches would be a 'great fillip' to the H-Block Committee's efforts to mobilise a popular street campaign.³⁵ On at least one occasion a H-Block march was timed so as not to clash with local GAA

delivering the oration, called Hurson 'a young man who played Gaelic football for the local GAA club in Galbally.'³⁰ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 July 2013. [Article published on 32nd anniversary of Hurson's death.]

³¹ Shamrocks GAC (Derry) placed an advertisement of support for Mickey McVey; Bellaghy GAC (Derry) supported Francis Hughes, while St. Teresa's GAA (Antrim) expressed support for Kieran Doherty. *Irish News*, 14 March 1981, 25 March 1981 & 22 April 1981.

³² Forkhill Peadar O Doirnin Club (Armagh), St. Malachy's GFC (Derry), Erin's Owen GAC (Derry), Eire Og GAC (Armagh), Ballinascreen GAA (Derry), Michael Davitt GAC and Ruairi OG GAC (Antrim). *Irish News*, 28 April 1981, 30 April 1981, 1 May 1981, 6 May 1981, 7 May 1981 & 12 May 1981.

³³ Sean O'Leary GAC (Derry), Cardinal O'Donnells GAC (Antrim), Erin's Own GAC (Antrim), Kickhams GAC (Antrim), Ardoyne GAA (Antrim), Crossmaglen Rangers GFC (Armagh), O'Donnells GAC (Antrim), St. Paul's GFC (Armagh) and Slaughtneil GAC (Derry). *Irish News*, 8 April 1981, 14 April 1981, 15 April 1981, 15 April 1981, 16 April 1981, 24 April 1981, 25 April 1981 & 25 April 1981.

³⁴ *Irish News*, 13 March 1981.

³⁵ Interview with Patrick MacFlynn, 20 August 2009, GAA Oral History Project.

fixtures,³⁶ while local H-Block committees, including the Dungannon³⁷ and Omagh³⁸ committees, appealed to GAA clubs to attend the H-Block demonstrations with their GAA banners. There was, however, some opposition to these marches from within the nationalist community and from within the GAA itself. The Bishop of Derry, Edward Daly, publicly called on people not to join demonstrations 'unless the group seeking that support publicly rejects murder and violence',³⁹ while Patrick McFlynn later explained that the parents of teenagers involved in the GAA did not want the GAA partaking in H-Block marches as they feared these teenagers would 'then become actively involved in the troubles that were going on.'⁴⁰

There is, however, evidence that GAA clubs took an official part in the H-Block marches held between 1 March and 29 May. Some clubs inserted notices in the *Irish News* calling on GAA members and supporters to attend the marches in their areas, while GAA club banners were 'prominent' at the marches, in particular the 26 April march from the Dunville Park (Belfast).⁴¹ On the other hand, the presence of GAA club banners at these marches was not always sanctioned by the respective clubs. The Executive Committee of the St. Gall's (Belfast) GAA club, who had at least two club members participating in the H-Block protests (Pat Sheehan and Michael Culbert), refused permission for their club banner to be carried at these marches. Some members of the club simply created a new club banner, and this was carried at H-Block marches without the permission of the club committee.⁴² In addition to GAA clubs participating in H-Block demonstrations, several H-Block demonstrations took place on GAA pitches throughout Ireland - these marches usually occurred during the half-time interval of a match and were, predominantly, unofficial incursions that did not have the approval of the GAA at local or national level. Incursions onto GAA pitches took place at Croke Park, where scuffles broke out between the protestors and the Gardaí,⁴³ Hyde Park⁴⁴ and Clones,⁴⁵ where, on both occasions, union jacks were burned on the pitches. There were also protests at several club matches. An 'unofficial' H-Block protest at the 15 March football match between the Derry clubs Lissan and Pearses, where the words 'H-Block' were spelled out with sawdust on

³⁶ The start of the 22 March march in Galladuff, South Derry, was delayed until 5.30pm so as not to clash with the local GAA fixtures. *Irish News*, 21 March 1981.

³⁷ *Dungannon Observer*, 14 March 1981.

³⁸ *Ulster Herald*, 25 April 1981.

³⁹ *Armagh-Down Observer*, 7 March 1981.

⁴⁰ Interview with Patrick MacFlynn, 20 August 2009, GAA Oral History Project.

⁴¹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 May 1981.

⁴² Interview with Michael Culbert, Belfast, 24 April 2014.

⁴³ *Irish Press*, 6 April 1981.

⁴⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 May 1981.

⁴⁵ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 2 May 1981.

the side-line of the Lisnagelvin playing pitch,⁴⁶ resulted in a fracas between some of the GAA players and the local DUP councillor, John Henry. In the aftermath of this game, the (then-legal) UDA said they would be compiling a dossier on the GAA to present to Humphrey Atkins, in an attempt to get all financial aid to the GAA stopped, while the UFF in Derry issued a statement that it now regarded all GAA personnel as 'legitimate targets'.⁴⁷

Between 5 May and 21 May, four hunger strikers died in relatively quick succession – Bobby Sands (5 May), Frances Hughes (12 May), Raymond McCreesh (21 May) and Patsy O'Hara (21 May). Following the death of Sands, the Central Council of the GAA released a statement in which it offered the sympathies of the GAA to the family of Sands and appealed to 'those responsible to afford normal decent standards and humane treatment to the prisoners.'⁴⁸ The Central Council did not release a further statement following the deaths of Hughes, McCreesh or O'Hara. As shall be discussed, messages of sympathy persisted beyond the death of Sands at a more local level. Other units of the GAA that offered their sympathies to the four dead hunger strikers include the Munster Council⁴⁹ and the Derry,⁵⁰ Armagh,⁵¹ Sligo⁵² and Meath county boards.⁵³ Several GAA clubs from within Northern Ireland,⁵⁴ and some American clubs,⁵⁵ inserted sympathy notices in the *Irish News*.⁵⁶

A number of county and divisional boards, predominantly in Ulster, cancelled GAA activities within their respective jurisdictions following the deaths of the first four hunger strikers. The majority of Gaelic games within Ulster, however, were carried out as scheduled. The South Antrim committee (which represented twenty-six clubs from the Belfast area), the

⁴⁶ The playing of Gaelic games on the Derry council owned Lisnagelvin playing pitch, located in the Waterside area of the city, had been controversial, with local residents objecting to Gaelic games on the pitch. The 15 March match had not been sanctioned by the Derry City Council and, as maintenance work had not been carried out on the pitch due to loyalist threats to the council workmen, GAA officials erected their own posts and lined out the pitch using sawdust.

⁴⁷ *Derry Journal*, 20 March 1981.

⁴⁸ Central Council minutes, 8 May 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 2), pp. 36-37.

⁴⁹ Munster Council minutes, 7 May 1981 & 28 May 1981, Munster Council Minute Book 1981, pp. 50 & 60.

⁵⁰ *Irish News*, 15 May 1981.

⁵¹ Armagh County Board minutes, 29 May 1981.

⁵² Sligo County Board minutes, 6 May 1981, Sligo County Board Minute Book 1977-1985.

⁵³ Meath County Board minutes, 11 May 1981 & 25 May 1981, Meath County Board Minute Book 1978-1982.

⁵⁴ Twinbrook GAA (Belfast), St Patrick's GFC (Fermanagh), Dromintee GFC (Armagh), Roger Casement GAC (Antrim), Annaghmore GFC (Armagh).

⁵⁵ Sean McDermott's GFC (San Francisco), Shannon Rangers Hurling and Football Clubs (San Francisco), San Francisco Gaels Hurling and Football Clubs, Los Angeles Wild Geese.

⁵⁶ *Irish News*, 6 May 1981, 8 May 1981, 9 May 1981, 22 May 1981, 23 May 1981 & 30 May 1981.

Antrim, Armagh,⁵⁷ Derry,⁵⁸ Tyrone,⁵⁹ Fermanagh⁶⁰ and New York⁶¹ county boards all cancelled fixtures, to varying degrees. Not all GAA supporters, even in Belfast, appreciated the cancelling of games. Following the death of Sands, the *Andersonstown News* GAA correspondent, who wrote under the name 'Joe Casement', complained that 'Antrim GAA came to a standstill' over the weekend of 9/10 May and argued that as Sands was buried on Thursday, 7 May, the Antrim GAA, 'having paid their due respects...should have got back to their No. 1 priority, that is playing Gaelic games.' 'Casement' further argued that the 'G.A.A. who were, and still are, Ireland's bulwark against Anglicization should not be intimidated by anyone' and he appealed to the 'Antrim clubs and officials to get their priorities in the proper order, as they did during the midweek, but should never have shut shop over the weekend.'⁶²

Some Ulster clubs withdrew from GAA competitions in protest at the deaths of the hunger strikers. Two Tyrone clubs, Clonoe O'Rahillys GFC and Derrytresk Fir na Chnoic GFC, placed a joint advertisement in the *Irish News*, on 23 May, stating that, due to the deteriorating political situation, both clubs were withdrawing from GAA activities 'pending a humane and just solution in the H-Block/Armagh Prison dispute.'⁶³ The league tables for the Tyrone football competitions, in the *Ulster Herald*, show that Derrytresk did not participate in any of their scheduled Division 3 league games throughout the entire course of the hunger strike, but that Clonoe O'Rahillys resumed playing their Division 2 matches in late June.⁶⁴ Similarly, the Derry club, Emmets GAC Slaughtneil, placed an advertisement in the *Irish News*, on 26 May, in which the club announced that 'for the duration of the present Hunger Strike we will not take part in any sporting competitions.'⁶⁵ Crossmaglen Rangers GFC (Armagh), whose pitch was occupied by the British Army, decided, however, to continue playing their games as an act of defiance. Gene Duffy, a long-serving official with the club, recalled that the Crossmaglen club came under pressure from people in Armagh to cancel games, but that, while club members were all 'very very supportive of the hunger strikers', they felt that 'it would be a wrong move for the Association to stop playing games and we fought very sternly to...keep

⁵⁷ *Irish News*, 6 May 1981 & 13 May 1981.

⁵⁸ *Irish News*, 23 May 1981.

⁵⁹ *Irish News*, 13 May 1981 & 23 May 1981.

⁶⁰ *Fermanagh Herald*, 9 May 1981.

⁶¹ Darby, *Gaelic Games, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora in the United States*, p. 190.

⁶² *Andersonstown News*, 16 May 1981.

⁶³ *Irish News*, 23 May 1981.

⁶⁴ *Ulster Herald*, 27 June 1981.

⁶⁵ *Irish News*, 26 May 1981.

our games going...in defiance of what the British [Army] wanted because the British [Army] wanted the games stopped...that would suit them.⁶⁶

Tributes to the four dead hunger strikers were also expressed at GAA matches throughout Ireland. The staging of a minute's silence at Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Cork, proved to be the most controversial mark of respect and temporarily reignited the dispute between the GAA and the GRA. Before the commencement of the All-Ireland club football semi-final, between Saint Finbarrs (Cork) and Scotstown (Monaghan), held in Páirc Uí Chaoimh on 24 May, the Cork county board secretary, Frank Murphy, according the *Irish Press*, 'asked over the loudspeaker for a minute's silence for two GAA men accidentally electrocuted at a pitch in Ballinora. Mr Murphy linked their names in the silent tribute with those of the "the four Irishmen who had died tragically in the H-Blocks hunger strike."' ⁶⁷ Senator Professor John A. Murphy⁶⁸ lodged a complaint with the Cork county board immediately after the minute's silence, stating that he 'didn't come to matches to have the Provos sympathy sentiments imposed on [him]'⁶⁹ and he accused the GAA of 'meddling in sectarian politics.'⁷⁰ Frank Murphy denied John A. Murphy's accusation and replied, through the *Cork Examiner*, that if Professor Murphy 'had listened to the full text of his [Frank Murphy's] messages of sympathy, he could not accuse anyone of sectarian politics.' The *Cork Examiner* carried the full text of the message read out by Frank Murphy before the match that included the line 'We also remember all our fellow countrymen who have died recently in the Northern Ireland troubles, and especially the four young men who tragically died on hunger strike in the H-Blocks.'⁷¹ Frank Murphy's statement ended the dispute between the Cork county board and Senator Murphy, although Senator Murphy later, at a press conference announcing his determination

⁶⁶ Interview with Eugene (Gene) Duffy, 22 July 2010, GAA Oral History Project.

⁶⁷ Denis O'Mahony and Denis O'Hara died, and five others were injured, on 24 May 1981, when the metal goalpost they were moving, at the Ballinora GAA grounds (Cork), came in contact with an overhead ESB power line. *Irish Press*, 25 May 1981 & 26 May 1981.

⁶⁸ Senator John A. Murphy was born in Macroom, Cork in 1927. In 1971 he was appointed Professor of Irish History in University College Cork (UCC), a position he held until his early retirement in 1990. During the periods 1977-1982 and 1987-1992, Murphy represented the National University of Ireland constituency in Seanad Éireann. Murphy also had a regular column with the *Sunday Independent*. Murphy was a consistent, and vocal, critic of Sinn Féin and the IRA, and also the H-Block campaigners – in a 27 July 1981 address to the Cork Rotary Club, Murphy accused the H-Block Committee of being increasingly indistinguishable from the Provisionals, whose aim was to destabilise the Republic and threaten its institutions. *Irish Independent*, 28 July 1981.

⁶⁹ *Cork Examiner*, 26 May 1981.

⁷⁰ *Cork Examiner*, 25 May 1981.

⁷¹ *Cork Examiner*, 26 May 1981.

to retain his seat in the 1981 Seanad elections, called on the GAA to be ‘resolutely anti-physical force...even if this meant cutting off clubs which supported the H-Block campaign.’⁷²

On 1 June, an article appeared in the *Irish Independent* in which Jack Marrinan, secretary of the GRA, raised the possibility that ‘Garda members of the GAA may be asked to quit the organisation because of its “tacit” support for the men of violence’ and that the ‘Garda Commissioners may be asked not to attend this year’s All-Ireland finals because of the GAA [sic] attitude to violence.’ Marrinan explained that he had received a number of complaints from Gardaí, who, Marrinan said, felt they had been ‘conned at the recent All-Ireland club football final [sic]...into standing in silent tribute to the Long Kesh hunger strikers.’ These Gardaí, according to Marrinan, were ‘very embarrassed’ as they had ‘got up thinking they were standing in tribute to two members of the GAA accidentally electrocuted...only to find...Frank Murphy...adding the hunger strikers to the tribute.’ Marrinan stated that the GRA had to take ‘some stand’ against an issue that ‘won’t go away’, and explained that the GRA ‘had received certain undertakings from the national officials [of the GAA] last October and felt they would disassociate themselves fully from the men of violence. But the sort of “clear substantial reaction” that the issue requires had not been forthcoming.’ Marrinan acknowledged that a number of county boards had ‘tried’ to pass motions condemning violence, but claimed that this was ‘discouraged’ by officials in Croke Park, whose attitude ‘left many outside observers in little doubt that there was a strong body of support in the GAA for the Provisional IRA.’⁷³

The contents of Marrinan’s statement indicate that the row over the Páirc Uí Chaoimh minute’s silence was symptomatic of a larger concern the GRA held about the GAA. At the GAA’s 1981 Annual Congress, held on 28/29 March, Patrick McFlynn, GAA president, told delegates that they had ‘an opportunity of giving your clear and emphatic answer to those who are attempting to misrepresent the views of the Association.’⁷⁴ There were two violence-related motions on the agenda for this Annual Congress - a Limerick motion called for the GAA to condemn ‘all forms of unlawful violence against personal property by any person or organisation, or whatever “cause” whatsoever’, and a joint Sligo/Roscommon/Fermanagh⁷⁵ motion that ‘the GAA as a 32-county organisation supports the ideal of National Unity by

⁷² *Irish Press*, 4 July 1981.

⁷³ *Irish Independent*, 1 June 1981.

⁷⁴ 1981 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1981 (Part 1), p. 224.

⁷⁵ The Fermanagh delegate subsequently told congress that his county did not sponsor this motion but that they had put forward a motion (which did not appear on the agenda) deploring the attitude of the media in misrepresenting the GAA’s attitude to violence.

peaceful means, but categorically condemns violence to achieve this objective.’ These two motions, however, were not put to the congress for acceptance or rejection but, instead, on the proposal of Con Murphy, ‘the policy of the Association with regard to violence as announced by An tUachtaran on several occasions during the past year’ was re-affirmed.⁷⁶

During the debate on whether to vote on the motions or re-affirm the policy of the association, Gene Larkin (Armagh) stated that he objected to ‘what the motions do not say’ while Tommy Mellon (Derry) argued that the motions ‘were dealing with the symptoms rather than the cause.’ The decision not to move the motions, accepted by an overwhelming majority, led to the Roscommon delegate, Eamonn Bolger, leaving the congress in protest.⁷⁷ The debate surrounding the two violence-related motions highlighted a real difference of opinion between delegates from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – the *Irish Independent* noted that ‘at one point an open split between Northern delegates and some of the delegation backing the motion on violence was only avoided by the intervention of president Mr. McFlynn and former president Mr. Murphy.’⁷⁸ Similarly, the Roscommon motion, discussed later in the congress, ‘That the G.A.A. should not in future issue any statement on political matters not directly affecting the G.A.A.’ was also withdrawn with Patrick O’Neill (Antrim) stating that ‘it would appear that certain of their problems in the North were an embarrassment to other people’, and that ‘there were things in the North that affected...G.A.A. men and women in the North that would not affect G.A.A. men and women in the South.’⁷⁹

Following the 1981 Annual Congress, the *Irish Independent* and the *Belfast Telegraph* both predicted that the proceedings of the congress would lead to a rift between the GAA and the An Garda Síochána. The *Belfast Telegraph* explained that the ‘failure...to pass resolutions condemning unequivocally the use of violence for political ends has caused deep resentment in the ranks of the Gardai’,⁸⁰ while the *Irish Independent*, on its front page and under the headline ‘Garda fury as GAA rejects violence motion’, reported that ‘there is now the possibility of the close historic links between the Gardai and the association being severed with the men threatening to withdraw from participation in GAA activities.’ Marrinan told the *Irish Independent* that the GAA ‘cannot compromise on violence’ and that ‘as the GAA rules now stand it seems that the GAA can, in its own words “unequivocally support the struggle for

⁷⁶ 1981 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1981 (Part 1), p. 245.

⁷⁷ *Irish Press*, 30 March 1981.

⁷⁸ *Irish Independent*, 30 March 1981.

⁷⁹ 1981 Annual Congress minutes, CCMB 1981 (Part 1), p. 247.

⁸⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 March 1981.

national liberation”’. The *Irish Independent* predicted that ‘the rift between the Gardai and the association is certain to lead to a breakaway of some kind and heighten the bitterness between them following the shooting of three gardai in counties Roscommon and Wexford.’⁸¹

Following Jack Marrinan’s 1 June statement, on 3 June the Cork county board released a lengthy statement, approved by McFlynn, refuting the allegations made by Marrinan. The statement called Marrinan’s allegation that Gardaí had been ‘conned’ as ‘false and misleading’ and explained that ‘no member of the Garda force was employed on official duty within the stadium on the occasion in question’ and, more importantly, that the ‘carefully prepared and authorised announcement...was concluded three minutes prior to the referee signalling the commencement of the minute’s silence. No one should have been in any doubt about the full contents of the announcement. No one was “conned”’. The statement re-iterated that the GAA, at national level, had been expressing its concern for the H-Block prisoners on humanitarian grounds, and that the Cork county board had ‘consistently supported and adhered strictly to the Association’s policies in these matters.’ The statement also commented that many county boards had, through their own conventions, outlined the association’s rejection of violence, and that ‘as the local newspapers gave prominence to these remarks it is strange that they were not “reported” to Mr. Marrinan [who] appears to receive only reports that are misleading, taken out of context and grossly unfair to this Board.’ The statement concluded by noting that an ‘outstanding level of support, co-operation, and goodwill has always existed between the Cork County Board and the Garda Síochána’ and that it would be ‘most regrettable if illfounded and unwarranted remarks by Mr. Marrinan would hinder this relationship or be the cause of dissension’, before warning that the ‘Association will not be deflected from its responsible National attitude by misrepresentation or by threat.’⁸²

This statement appeared in the national and provincial press the following day, 4 June, with the *Cork Examiner* reprinting the statement in full on its front page. The *Irish Independent*, on its own front page, reported that the Cork county board had ‘launched a personal attack on Garda rank-and-file chief Jack Marrinan’ and that the ‘ongoing row’ between the GAA and the GRA had now escalated.⁸³ The *Irish Times* also reported on the statement, under the headline ‘Marrinan attacked by G.A.A.’⁸⁴ This, however, seemed to end the dispute between the two

⁸¹ *Irish Independent*, 30 March 1981.

⁸² Statement issued by the Cork County Board, 3 June 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

⁸³ *Irish Independent*, 4 June 1981.

⁸⁴ *Irish Times*, 4 June 1981.

bodies – there is no further mention of the dispute in any of the national newspapers. At the July Coiste Bainistí meeting, the first meeting after Marrinan’s accusation, a letter was received from the GRA ‘explaining that the Association Secretary had been misquoted by the newspapers in comments made about the GAA.’⁸⁵

When Frank Maguire, the Independent nationalist MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone, died suddenly on 5 March,⁸⁶ the National H-Block Committee decided that Bobby Sands would stand as an ‘Anti H-Block/Armagh political prisoner’ candidate in the resultant by-election. On 10 April, Sands was elected the MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone, having received 30,492 votes as opposed to Harry West’s (Ulster Unionist Party) 29,046 votes. The supposed purpose of Sands’ candidacy was ‘not about securing an entry into electoral politics; it was about the possibility of gaining publicity and building the [H-Block] campaign.’⁸⁷ Neither the H-Block Committee⁸⁸ nor Sinn Féin⁸⁹ considered the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election as a ‘normal political election’ in that its objective was not about winning a seat for a political party, but instead it was an opportunity to try and save the life of Bobby Sands. There is no doubt, however, that the republican political strategists would have been aware of the wider implications of electoral success in the by-election. According to Hennessey, ‘Sands’ victory produced a jubilant response from his campaigners, who emphasised its wider political implications for the British presence in Ireland’.⁹⁰

Throughout Sands’ election campaign - between 26 March and 9 April - GAA personnel campaigned on behalf of Sands; some GAA grounds were used for electioneering purposes and some Ulster clubs expressed their support for Sands’ candidacy by placing advertisements in nationalist newspapers. The advertisement in the *Irish News* for the 8 April ‘Massive Eve of Poll Rally’, in Tyrone, listed Joe Keohane as one of the main speakers and described him as a ‘former All Ireland GAA Star (8 All-Ireland medals).’⁹¹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News* reported that ‘In Fermanagh/South Tyrone last Sunday [5 April],

⁸⁵ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 17 July 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 2), p. 143.

⁸⁶ Frank Maguire was a playing member of the Lisnaskea Emmets (Fermanagh) GAA club. Maguire also played for the Fermanagh senior football team for a number of years. Lisnaskea cancelled their senior and junior league matches as a mark of respect when Maguire died. (*Fermanagh News*, 7 March 1981). The entire executive of the Ulster G.A.A. and the former Ulster secretary, Malachy Mahon, and the Fermanagh GAA secretary and chairman attended Maguire’s funeral. (*Fermanagh Herald*, 14 March 1981).

⁸⁷ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 118.

⁸⁸ Interview with Jim Gibney, Belfast, 4 October 2014.

⁸⁹ Interview with Danny Morrison, Belfast, 22 October 2014.

⁹⁰ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 171.

⁹¹ *Irish News*, 8 April 1981.

the election campaign of Bobby Sands was in full swing with...after-match meetings at many gaelic football grounds in the area', and also that 'speakers addressed crowds attending a gaelic football tournament in Augher, County Tyrone.'⁹²

Five Tyrone clubs⁹³ placed a joint advertisement in 7 April *Irish News* pledging their support to Sands in the by-election and urging 'all their supporters to cast their vote for him.'⁹⁴ This *Irish News* advertisement was used, and reproduced, by Sean Kilfeather in the *Irish Times* as an example of what Kilfeather called 'a blatant breach of Rule 7 of the GAA which describes the association as "non party-political."' Kilfeather argued that while 'some people skilled in ambivalent pedantry may argue that Bobby Sands is not a member of any political party...he is taking part in a contest against a member of a political party for a seat in a party political system in a situation from which other party political people withdrew.' Kilfeather expressed his opinion that 'the air around Croke Park these days is filled with flapping of the wings of the pigeons coming home to roost' and, having reminded readers about his open letter to the GAA president in 1979, asked 'Will the GAA allow this state of affairs to continue or will it stop now...The Tyrone Five have taken a serious step. The next move is up to Croke Park.'⁹⁵ Two more Tyrone clubs, St. Colmcilles⁹⁶ and Greencastle St. Patrick's GFC,⁹⁷ placed separate advertisements in the *Irish News* and *Ulster Herald*, urging people to vote for Sands. Peter Quinn explained that the Ulster Council and the Ulster county boards, whilst recognising that clubs that inserted these notices of support for Sands had crossed the line from 'humanitarian to political', did not intervene, but instead 'turned the proverbial eye'. Quinn further explained that 'the considered view, which was never recorded, was it was none of our business.'⁹⁸

During the early stage of the hunger strike, 1 March – 29 May, the National H-Block Committee, Sinn Féin and the H-Block prisoners approached the GAA, at all levels, in an attempt to persuade the association to come out in full public support of the hunger strike. As discussed, however, support for the hunger strike was confined, predominantly, to some Ulster clubs and county boards, who acted in an independent and varied manner. At the outset of the hunger strike, neither the Central nor Ulster councils issued any guidelines as to

⁹² *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 11 April 1981.

⁹³ Brackagh Emmets GFC, Derrytresk GFC, Clonoe O'Rahilly's GFC, Brackaville Owen Roe GFC and Coalisland Fianna GFC.

⁹⁴ *Irish News*, 7 April 1981.

⁹⁵ *Irish Times*, 10 April 1981.

⁹⁶ *Irish News*, 9 April 1981.

⁹⁷ *Irish News*, 9 April 1981 & *Ulster Herald*, 11 April 1981.

⁹⁸ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

what actions county boards and clubs could, or could not, take in support of the hunger strike. Those clubs and county boards that publicly supported the hunger strike, by participating in marches, cancelling or curtailing GAA fixtures and withdrawing from competitions, could point to the last Central Council directive issued on the matter, on 4 December 1980, which clearly stated that ‘any genuine peaceful efforts to resolve the situation and bring the continuing spiral of violence to an end is worthy of the support of all G.A.A. units.’ GAA support for the candidacy of Sands in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election was interpreted by some, including Sean Kilfeather, as a breach of the GAA’s ‘non party-political’ rule, but, surprisingly, and despite a direct challenge by Kilfeather to do so, the Central Council of the GAA did not intervene. As shall be discussed below, however, the dynamic of the GAA’s support for the hunger strikers was radically altered when the National H-Block Committee entered nine H-Block prisoners into the June 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland.

III.

This section will focus on the GAA’s involvement in, and reaction to, the latter stage of the 1981 hunger strike, between 29 May and 3 October. During this period six hunger strikers died. Four of these hunger strikers, McDonnell (St. Teresa’s GFC), Hurson (Galbally Pearses), Lynch (St. Patrick’s Hurling Club) and Doherty (St. Teresa’s GFC) were members of the GAA. This section will focus on the developing debate within the GAA as to the appropriate level of support for the hunger strikers. Crucially, it will explore how the dispute was transformed by the calling of a general election in the Republic of Ireland, and by the decision of the National H-Block Committee to run candidates. This section will also explore how the GAA reacted to the deaths of the final six hunger strikers, and the association’s reaction to the conclusion of the hunger strike itself.

On 21 May, An Taoiseach Charles Haughey asked President Patrick Hillery to dissolve the Dáil, and announced that a general election would take place on 11 June. Although two hunger strikers, Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O’Hara, died on the day the general election was called, Haughey was adamant that the H-Blocks crisis had not forced him into calling it.⁹⁹ Following the electoral success of Bobby Sands in the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election,

⁹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 22 May 1981.

the National H-Block Committee announced on 29 May that they were going to run nine¹⁰⁰ H-Block and Armagh prisoners as candidates in the general election in the Republic.¹⁰¹ Following a two-week campaign, during which both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael candidates were harassed by supporters of the hunger strikers - with a pot of paint thrown over Haughey,¹⁰² Kieran Doherty (Cavan/Monaghan) and Paddy Agnew (Louth) were elected to the Dáil. The *Irish Independent* commented that the election of Doherty and Agnew was 'a major propaganda coup for those orchestrating support for the Maze hunger strikers' and added that 'the H-Blocks could be a more serious issue throughout the Republic than has been believed.'¹⁰³

As in the Sands campaign, both Sinn Féin and the National H-Block Committee insisted that the candidatures of the nine prisoners was not an attempt to enter parliamentary politics but, instead, 'its primary objective [was] revitalising the campaign in support of the hunger-strikers and remobilising support'.¹⁰⁴ The candidatures, however, prompted Con Murphy, GAA president between 1976 and 1979, to write to Liam Mulvihill on 31 May that the National H-Block Committee had entered the 'party-political' arena. Murphy expressed the view that the GAA 'cannot in anyway identify...with the National H-Block Committee or any subsidiary committees any longer.' Murphy further wrote that 'apart from going party political we have allied to this the distasteful conduct in the course of the election campaign of those purporting to represent H-Block and in view of all this...Cumann Luth Chleas Gael must stay completely clear.'¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, Mulvihill issued a directive, dated 4 June 1981,¹⁰⁶ to each county secretary which read

As you are probably aware, the National H-Block Committee has decided to enter candidates in a number of constituencies for the forthcoming General Election and has set up an election organisation to back those candidates. In view of those developments the H Block question has now very clearly entered the party political arena and as such it is not possible for GAA clubs, County Boards or other units to be involved in any way of Riail 7 Treoraí Oifigiúil.

¹⁰⁰ The candidates were Joe McDonnell (Sligo/Leitrim), Kieran Doherty (Cavan/Monaghan), Paddy Agnew (Louth), Martin Hurson (Longford/Westmeath), Tony O'Hara (Dublin West), Kevin Lynch (Waterford), Sean McKenna (Kerry North), Tom McAlister (Clare) and Mairead Farrell (Cork North Central).

¹⁰¹ *Irish Independent*, 30 May 1981.

¹⁰² Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 243.

¹⁰³ *Irish Independent*, 13 June 1981.

¹⁰⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 13 June 1981.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Con Murphy to Liam Mulvihill, 31 May 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁰⁶ The minute book of the GAA indicates that there was no meeting of neither the Coiste Bainistí nor the Central Council before Liam Mulvihill issued this directive.

You are asked to bring the contents of this statement to all clubs and to point out that, until further notice, no club or unit should issue statements or show support in any other way for what has become a party political issue. What members do as individuals will, of course, be their own business.¹⁰⁷

Mulvihill's statement that the 'H-Block question' had 'very clearly entered the party political arena' can be interpreted in two ways. The H-Block candidates had entered into a general election, an arena where political parties and independent candidates compete against one another, and, thus, Mulvihill is correct to say that the National H-Block Committee had entered the 'party political arena'. This view, however, does not take into consideration the claim that the H-Block candidates entered into this 'arena' with no party political ambitions, but, instead, chose to contest the election in an effort to further their own campaign, a campaign that the GAA had already publicly supported on humanitarian grounds. Those opposed to the GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks crisis could argue that the H-Block candidatures were in breach of the GAA's non-party-political rule, while those in favour of the association's involvement could argue that the H-Block candidatures were humanitarian in nature, and did not breach association rules.

On 3 June, the day before Liam Mulvihill issued the GAA directive, Dermot Conway (Diarmuid Ó Conbhuí), secretary of the Tyrone county board, sent a letter to Mulvihill that perfectly illustrates the dilemma faced by, and consequent dichotomy within, the GAA throughout the 1981 hunger strike. While the higher echelons of the GAA, as represented by Murphy and Mulvihill, sought to remove the association from the H-Blocks crisis, a substantial proportion of the ordinary members in Ulster, in this case the Tyrone clubs, were of the opinion that the association should become more involved in the H-Block campaign. Conway, in his letter to Mulvihill, outlined the opinions being voiced in clubs throughout Tyrone with regards the response of the Central Council to the H-Blocks crisis, and included the text of a statement the Tyrone county board intended for release to the media. Conway explained that there 'is a strong feeling in Tyrone by all 48 clubs that despite resolutions being passed that not enough is being done by Central Council re the worsening situation in the H-Blocks.' Conway explained that the Tyrone county board had held two meetings with the Tyrone clubs, at which 'all the clubs [were] of the opinion that Central Council of the G.A.A. must do something to try and help the situation.' Conway warned that if 'there is no positive action from Croke Park a big number of our clubs could well pull out of football and that would be a disaster for us'

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Liam Mulvihill to each County Board Secretary, 4 June 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

and he urged Mulvihill ‘to act positively’ and approach members of the ‘new’ Irish government,¹⁰⁸ and to also arrange a meeting between the thirty-two county chairmen.

Five days later, 8 June, Conway sent Mulvihill a further letter, this time enclosing letters from ten Tyrone clubs¹⁰⁹ in which the clubs expressed their disappointment and anger at the decisions taken by the Central Council in relation to the H-Block prison-protests. The dates of these letters indicate that they were written before the 4 June directive was issued and they were not a reaction to the directive. All ten clubs requested that the GAA, at national level, take more positive action with regards to the hunger strike; six of the clubs¹¹⁰ made reference to the fact that many of those on protest in the H-Blocks were GAA members, while four clubs¹¹¹ threatened to withdraw from competitions in support of the hunger strikers. Kildress Wolfe Tones GFC warned that if there was no positive action from the Central Council, the club would ‘do our utmost to lobby provincial support, and failing that county support, for a march on Croke Park, calling for the GAA to act before there are further deaths.’

The statement that Conway sent to Mulvihill in his 3 June letter first appeared in the *Irish News* on 5 June, under the headline ‘GAA step into jail crisis with plea from Tyrone.’ This statement was also published on 13 June in the *Ulster Herald* and *Dungannon Observer*. The statement, signed by fifty-two Tyrone clubs,¹¹² stated that the Tyrone GAA viewed ‘with the deepest concern and anxiety the extremely grave and worsening situation in the H-Blocks’ and that the county board called ‘on the Thatcher administration to immediately initiate moves to bring about a just, lasting and equitable solution’ and to ‘change its attitude and show a

¹⁰⁸ As a result of the June 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland, a Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition formed the new government, with Garret Fitzgerald as Taoiseach.

¹⁰⁹ Tattyreagh GFC, Moy Tir-na-nOg, Kildress Wolfe Tones GFC, Rock St. Patricks GFC, Clogher Eire Og GFC, Derryloughan Kevin Barry’s GFC, Brochagh Emmets GFC, Moortown St Malachys GFC, Eglis St Patricks GFC, Brackaville Owen Roe’s GFC.

¹¹⁰ Moy Tir-na-nOg GFC, Rock St Patrick’s GFC, Clogher Eire Og GFC, Brochagh Emmets GFC, Moortown St Malachy’s GFC, Eglis St Patrick’s GFC.

¹¹¹ Tattyreagh GFC, Moy Tir-na-nOg GFC, Clogher Eire Og GFC, Brochagh Emmets GFC.

¹¹² Ardboe O’Donovan Rossas, Augher St. Macartan’s, Aghyaran St. Davogs, Aghaloo O’Neills, Aughabrack O’Connells, Beragh Red Knights, Brackey Handball Club, Brocagh Emmets, Ballygawley St. Ciarans, Brackaville Eoghain Ruaidh, Carrickmore St. Colmcilles, Cloughlin Handball Club, Coalisland Fianna, Cookstown Fr. Rocks, Clogher Eire Og, Clonoe O Rathallaigh, Castlederg St. Eugenes, Derrylaughan Kevin Barrys, Derrytresk Fir na Cnoic, Domaghamore St. Patricks, Dregish Pearse Og, Drumquin Wolfe Tones, Drumquin Handball Club, Drumragh Sarsfields, Dromore St. Dympnas, Dungannon Thomas Clarkes, Dungannon Eoghan Ruaidh, Eglis St. Patricks, Edendork St. Malachys, Eskra Emmets, Fintona Pearses, Glenelly St. Josephs, Gortin St. Patricks, Galbally Pearses, Greencastle St. Patricks, Kildress Wolfe Tones, Kileeshil St. Marys, Killyclogher St. Marys, Loughmacrory St. Therasas, Loughmacrory Handball Club, Moortown St. Malachys, Moy Tir na nOg, Moutfield GFC, Newtownstewart St Eugenes, Omagh St. Endas, Pomeroy Plunketts, Pomeroy Handball Club, Rock St. Patricks, Stewartstown Harps, Strabane Sigersons, Tattyreagh St. Patricks and Trillick St. Macartans.

readiness to understand the inner conflicts of the Northern Ireland Nationalist population.¹¹³ The statement was welcomed by the group Gaels Against the Blocks who argued that the Tyrone statement showed ‘the genuine concern felt by G.A.A. members at the continuing intransigence of the British government towards the situation existing within the prisons of Northern Ireland.’¹¹⁴

The Coiste Bainisti, at their 5/6 June meeting, directed Liam Mulvihill to write to Conway and explain that ‘Ard-Chomhairle and An Coiste Bainisti have made numerous efforts to influence public representatives in this matter...[and]...that correspondence with An Taoiseach was continuing.’¹¹⁵ On 8 June, Mulvihill wrote to An Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, and enclosed correspondence showing that ‘a number of GAA clubs have withdrawn from the Association on [the H-Blocks issue]’. Mulvihill also included a copy of a 1 May 1981 letter from Mulvihill and McFlynn to An Taoiseach, in which they asked for An Taoiseach to ‘intervene personally’ in the hunger strike, and to which they had received no reply.¹¹⁶ (On 19 June, Haughey replied to Mulvihill that he shared the GAA’s concerns about the H-Blocks crisis and included the text of several statements he had made on the issue.¹¹⁷)

Mulvihill, on 10 June, wrote to Conway and explained that ‘with the entry of H Block candidates into the party political arena in both the Six Counties and the Republic, it is no longer possible to express support for the cause’. Mulvihill further explained that GAA members could pursue the matter in a personal capacity and that ‘where the best interests of the Association are involved it would be possible to make approaches to all political parties for a settlement.’ Mulvihill outlined the steps that the GAA, at national level, had taken which included the release of several strong statements, numerous letters to An Taoiseach, two meetings with the ‘Minister for External Affairs’¹¹⁸ and a number of meetings with the National H-Block Committee ‘previous to its entry into party politics.’ Mulvihill, enclosing newspaper cuttings, cautioned that ‘this matter is not looked upon in the same light all over the country. You will note that we have been in controversy with Garda leaders in connection with

¹¹³ *Irish News*, 5 June 1981.

¹¹⁴ *Andersonstown News*, 13 June 1981.

¹¹⁵ Coiste Bainisti minutes, 5 – 6 June 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 2), p. 95.

¹¹⁶ Letter, and enclosure, from Liam Mulvihill to Charles Haughey, 8 June 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Charles Haughey to Liam Mulvihill, 19 June 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹¹⁸ The title ‘Department of External Affairs’ was replaced with the title ‘Department of Foreign Affairs’ in 1971. The Department of Foreign Affairs has responsibility for Anglo-Irish affairs, including Northern Ireland. The department’s name, however, implies that Northern Ireland is a foreign country.

statements made in the past.’ Mulvihill told Conway that the Coiste Bainistí would ‘seek a meeting with the Government immediately after the General Election and the concern of the Association will be expressed very forcibly.’ Turning to the Tyrone clubs, Mulvihill congratulated the clubs on the ‘clear and emotive way in which the letters were written’ but argued that the clubs ‘will be much more effective in working within the Association and that by withdrawing from activities they are only weakening the unit which they seek to help them.’¹¹⁹

The correspondence from the Tyrone clubs, and the Coiste Bainistí’s reaction to it, highlight the disparity of opinion that existed amongst the various units of the GAA with regards to the association’s involvement in the H-Blocks campaign. The letters from the Tyrone clubs clearly show that GAA members within that county felt that the leadership of the GAA was not doing enough to facilitate the H-Blocks campaign, despite the repeated passing of motions in favour of the prisoners at county, provincial and national levels. Conversely, however, the Coiste Bainistí had to consider a number of factors, including the entry of H-Block candidates in the 1981 general election (Republic of Ireland) and by-elections (Northern Ireland) and previous controversies with the leadership of the GRA. Mulvihill’s reply to Conway, that the association had held two meetings with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and had sent numerous letters to An Taoiseach, is, whilst true, somewhat misleading. As discussed in Chapter Two, one of the meetings held between the GAA and Brian Lenihan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, was predominantly about the British military occupation of Saint Oliver Plunkett Park (Crossmaglen) with the H-Blocks only briefly mentioned as the meeting concluded.¹²⁰ Similarly, while the GAA did write to An Taoiseach on two occasions, the association received only one reply from the government, and it was nothing more than a standard reply. It must be remembered that the hunger strikes heightened political, sectarian and paramilitary tensions in Northern Ireland to levels previously unseen, and, for a period, it seemed as if the violence could spread to the Republic of Ireland - it is highly unlikely that GAA clubs withdrawing from competitions in Tyrone would have been a priority for the Irish government during this crisis.

Inexplicably, the 4 June directive did not become public knowledge until 28 July, when the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and *Belfast Telegraph* all reported on its existence. The fact

¹¹⁹ Letter from Liam Mulvihill to Diarmuid Ó Conbhuí, 19 June 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹²⁰ Minutes of the meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and GAA delegation, 19 November 1980. DFA/2011/39/1787.

that the directive was reported on by three newspapers on the same day indicates that the directive was either leaked to the newspapers or the newspapers were made aware of the directive in a co-ordinated manner. While there is some evidence that county boards did receive the GAA directive in June, including the Meath¹²¹ and Armagh¹²² county boards, several county boards, including Kerry, Monaghan and Cork, denied that they had received, or seen, the directive following its 28 July 'public release'.¹²³ Following the conclusion of the hunger strike, the Down chairman, Benny Crawford, told critics of Down GAA that they should be criticising their own county secretaries for 'keeping various documents' and not discussing the directive with their clubs.¹²⁴

Some GAA clubs and county boards continued their involvement in the H-Block campaign throughout the period from 4 June (when the directive was issued) to 28 July (when the directive was made public). As mentioned above, it is somewhat unclear if clubs and county boards realised that their continued involvement in the H-Blocks campaign, post 4 June, was in violation of a GAA directive, as they may not have received the directive. While it is also conceivable that clubs and county boards within Northern Ireland felt that the directive did not apply to them, as the election was taking place in the Republic of Ireland, this is unlikely as the directive was issued to each county secretary, with no differentiation made in the directive between clubs from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It may also have just been the case that it was normal for clubs to ignore directives from Croke Park, as they had done when they allowed earlier H-Block marches to take place on their grounds. Some GAA clubs placed notices of support for the hunger strikers in the *Irish News*¹²⁵ and the *Fermanagh Herald*¹²⁶ during this period, although these GAA notices were not as numerous as before. At county board level, the Antrim county board placed a notice in the *Irish News* that it 'fully [supported] the prisoners on hunger strike and [urged] immediate action from the British Government to grant their five demands',¹²⁷ while the Derry county board released a statement '[adding] its voice to those of Church and state leaders calling on the British Government to

¹²¹ Meath county board minutes, 8 June 1981, Meath County Board Minute Book 1978-1982.

¹²² Armagh county board minutes, 25 June 1981.

¹²³ *Irish Press*, 29 July 1981.

¹²⁴ *Irish News*, 18 January 1982.

¹²⁵ Faughanvale GAC (Derry), Saint Canice's GAA (Derry), Saint Teresa's GAC (Belfast), *Irish News*, 20 June 1981, 17 July 1981 & 25 July 1981.

¹²⁶ Saint Patrick's GFC (Fermanagh) placed a notice in the *Fermanagh Herald* declaring their support 'for the hunger strikers and the march in their support in Enniskillen on Sunday 26th July.' This was the first GAA notice in the *Fermanagh Herald* since the hunger strike began. *Fermanagh Herald*, 25 July 1981.

¹²⁷ *Irish News*, 1 July 1981.

abandon its intransigent attitude and resolve the present deadlock in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh.¹²⁸

There is also evidence of GAA involvement in the election campaign in the Republic of Ireland. Joe Keohane was once again a prominent member of the H-Block election campaigns and, on occasions, he used his GAA status for the advantage of the National H-Block Committee. When electioneering for Joe McDonnell (Sligo/Leitrim), Keohane made a direct appeal to his 'many friends and colleagues in the G.A.A. for their fullest co-operation' in getting McDonnell elected.¹²⁹ Tommy Moyna, a well-known Monaghan football player, 'canvassed from door to door, and visited GAA clubs and lobbied players and members on the prisoners [sic] behalf throughout the county, until he was only fit to drop.'¹³⁰ Those campaigning on behalf of Kevin Lynch (Waterford) produced an election flyer that featured a photograph of Lynch receiving the All-Ireland Under-16 hurling cup from the then GAA president, Pat Fanning,¹³¹ with the by-line 'This was a proud day for Kevin. Polling Day can be a Proud Day for Waterford. Vote No1 Kevin Lynch.'¹³² Pat Fanning quickly, and publicly, disassociated himself from the National H-Block Committee and objected to his photograph being used by the National H-Block Committee.¹³³ None of this contravened any GAA rule or directive, however, as with the election campaign for Sands, the National H-Block Committee used GAA grounds for electioneering purposes, both before and after the 4 June directive. *An Phoblacht/Republican News* reported that during the Monaghan v Tyrone Ulster Under-21 football match, held in Clones on 31 May, 'members of the election committee were given permission to address the crowd.' The election campaign also took advantage of GAA crowds for electioneering purposes – *An Phoblacht/Republican News* reported that following the Leinster Senior football quarter-final match between Offaly and Westmeath 'a meeting was held after [the] GAA match in Mullingar.'¹³⁴

H-Block protests were also held at several GAA grounds during the period 4 June – 28 July; these protests took place at times when Gaelic games were being played and also on non-

¹²⁸ *Irish News*, 18 July 1981.

¹²⁹ *Leitrim Observer*, 6 June 1981.

¹³⁰ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 20 June 1981.

¹³¹ Pat Fanning was GAA president for the period 1970 – 1973. Fanning was a native of Waterford; he played inter-county hurling with Waterford at minor, junior and senior levels, while he also held seven Waterford senior hurling medals, won with his club Mount Sion.

¹³² Hegarty, *Kevin Lynch and the Irish Hunger Strike*, p. 89.

¹³³ *Irish Independent*, 12 June 1981.

¹³⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 6 June 1981.

match days. Gaels Against the Blocks placed an advertisement in the *Andersonstown News* urging all 'concerned G.A.A. clubs' to participate in the 14 June hunger strike march in Belfast, a march that concluded with speeches being made in Casement Park.¹³⁵ On 25 July, O'Donovan Rossa GAC (Belfast), held a twelve hour vigil outside their club grounds on the Falls Road, at which the club 'publicly called on other GAA clubs to follow suit and become actively involved in the hunger-strike campaign.'¹³⁶ There were also half-time incursions throughout the 1981 Ulster senior football championship games, including the quarter-final replay between Monaghan and Down in Castleblaney on 28 June and the semi-final between Down and Derry held in Clones on 5 July. At the Ulster football final, between Armagh and Down in Clones on 19 July, 'about one hundred hunger strike protestors formed an "H" on the pitch at half-time.'¹³⁷ This protest in particular generated a lot of bad publicity for the Ulster Council. Despite the earlier pitch incursions, Peter Quinn later wrote that 'while there had been rumours of some sort of protest', the Ulster Council 'had not anticipated that it would occur on the pitch.'¹³⁸ Quinn later explained that the Ulster Council 'thought the protest would be outside either before the game started...or after the game was over.' When the Ulster Council realised what form the protest was taking, the four senior officers of the Ulster Council 'got together very quickly' and 'agreed that the secretary would go down to the Gardaí and ask them not to intervene' in the protest. The Ulster Council was worried that if they tried to stop the protest, it could have caused a riot.¹³⁹

As with the 1980 hunger strike demonstrations, the GAA were effectively powerless to prevent these demonstrations from taking place on GAA grounds. Speaking after the 28 July 'public release' of the 4 June directive, McFlynn told both the *Irish Times* and the *Belfast Telegraph* that while the GAA did not approve of such demonstrations, 'it was difficult to implement a decision. Entry was gained by people paying in the ordinary way who at half-time invaded the field.' Similarly, an unnamed 'GAA Official', presumably Pat Quigley, in response to a query about these demonstrations, hypothetically asked Sean Kilfeather 'How could we refuse permission when the people asking the permission would not take no for an answer. If we tried to stop them we'd have a riot.'¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ *Andersonstown News*, 13 June 1981.

¹³⁶ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 1 August 1981.

¹³⁷ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 4 July 1981, 11 July 1981 & 25 July 1981.

¹³⁸ Quinn, *The Outsider*, p. 147.

¹³⁹ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

¹⁴⁰ *Irish Times*, 29 July 1981.

Two hunger strikers died between 4 June and 28 July - Joe McDonnell (Belfast) died on 8 July while Martin Hurson (Tyrone) died on 13 July. Both McDonnell (St. Teresa's) and Hurson (Galbally Pearses) were members of the GAA, but neither St. Teresa's nor Galbally Pearses placed a sympathy notice in the *Irish News* following the deaths of their members. The wider GAA reaction, at club level, to these two deaths was also somewhat muted - the Donegal Celtic camogie team was the only Gaelic team to place a sympathy notice in the *Irish News* following the death of Joe McDonnell,¹⁴¹ while no GAA club placed a sympathy notice in the *Irish News* following the death of Martin Hurson. This decline in public support for the hunger strikers was not confined to the GAA: David Beresford notes, in *Ten Men Dead*, that following the death of Joe McDonnell 'funeral parades' were held across Ireland, but 'it was noticeable that the crowds were smaller than previously.'¹⁴² The Tyrone county board did, however, release a statement expressing sorrow at the death of McDonnell and requesting that clubs and county boards throughout Ireland ask their public representatives to put pressure on the British and Irish governments to find a solution. The Tyrone county board further stated that 'all peaceful efforts to have the crisis resolved are worthy of the support of all members of the Association.'¹⁴³

As the health of Martin Hurson deteriorated, the 'Tyrone Smash H-Block Armagh Committee' wrote a letter to each GAA club in Tyrone, published in the *Ulster Herald*, asking GAA clubs to withdraw indefinitely from all competitions. The Tyrone H-Block Committee, noting that they were 'not at loggerheads with the G.A.A.', stated that they believed 'that whilst activities organised by the G.A.A. continue, maximum attendance at H-Block demonstrations is not possible.' The committee asked clubs in Tyrone to 'call an emergency meeting of your Club, consider our request to cancel all forthcoming fixtures, attend the Six-county demonstration from Belleeks to Camlough on Sunday July 12th and all subsequent demonstrations in support of the hunger strike.'¹⁴⁴ (This request is somewhat contradictory of an earlier Tyrone H-Block Committee statement, in which the committee made it clear that that were not asking 'centres of dancing or social entertainment' to close down during Hurson's hunger strike, as 'such places provide invaluable outlets for publicity etc.'¹⁴⁵) While no Tyrone clubs withdrew from their respective competitions, the Tyrone senior football championship

¹⁴¹ *Irish News*, 10 July 1981.

¹⁴² Beresford, *Ten Men Dead*, pp. 309-310.

¹⁴³ *Irish News*, 10 July 1981.

¹⁴⁴ *Ulster Herald*, 11 July 1981.

¹⁴⁵ *Ulster Herald*, 6 June 1981.

quarter-final between Trillick and Carrickmore, scheduled for 17 July, was cancelled with the *Ulster Herald* commenting that 'it was a case of putting the plum of a tie of the competition in cold storage.'¹⁴⁶

On 28 July, the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and the *Belfast Telegraph* all reported on the existence of the 4 June directive, with the three newspapers all stating that the leadership of the GAA had prohibited any GAA involvement in the wider H-Block campaign. Sean Kilfeather, in a front-page *Irish Times* article, entitled 'GAA H-Block support must end – HQ' explained that 'Previously the GAA had regarded the matter as a "humanitarian one" and thrown the weight of its supporters behind the protests and the five demands of the prisoners' but that 'the candidature and election of H-Block hunger strikers to parliamentary seats in Dublin and London has brought about the change.'¹⁴⁷ Kilfeather predicted that the 'change of attitude is almost certain to cause friction within the GAA, particularly in the North, where many clubs have been openly marching behind GAA banners and where several demonstrations have been staged at half-time in recent matches.' While Liam Mulvihill, according to the *Irish Times*, refused to divulge the contents of the 4 June directive to the newspaper, a 'spokesman for the GAA' confirmed that 'a circular had gone out to county boards following inquiries about what attitude should be adopted to H-Block candidates in the recent election.' Kilfeather later revealed that he telephoned Croke Park 'at least three times' prior to writing the article but, on each occasion, he was refused the text of the directive.¹⁴⁸ Kilfeather, a consistent critic of the 1979 party-political rule change, argued that 'the recent development opens up again the controversy within the GAA about Rule 7 and about the GAA's attitude to violent politics...It can, indeed, be argued that the H-Block issue caused a change in Rule 7 of the GAA.'¹⁴⁹

There was an immediate reaction to the public release of this statement from both the South Antrim executive and the Tyrone county board. The South Antrim GAA executive committee held a specially convened meeting on the day of the directive's 'public release', 28 July, and released a statement reiterating their support for the prisoners and stating that 'no matches will be played in this Divisional area on days of National H-Block demonstrations, when all members are asked to march with their club banners in support with the prisoners'

¹⁴⁶ *Ulster Herald*, 18 July 1981.

¹⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, 28 July 1981.

¹⁴⁸ *Irish Times*, 7 August 1981.

¹⁴⁹ *Irish Times*, 28 July 1981.

demands.’¹⁵⁰ Pat O’Neill, secretary of the South Antrim executive committee, told the *Irish Press* that the executive committee was ‘very annoyed...that we have not got a copy of this directive’ and that ‘if these reports are true, it is a drastic change as far as the GAA is concerned and one which we will take up with the highest levels of authority in the association.’¹⁵¹ Similarly, the Tyrone county board released a statement (its third in three weeks) in which the county board restated that their policy of ‘rearranging the time of fixtures on the days of H Block demonstrations and of cancelling games on the occasion of the death of a hunger striker’ reflected the wishes of GAA members in the county.¹⁵²

There was also an immediate reaction to the ‘public release’ of the directive from GAA clubs, Belfast clubs in particular. The *Andersonstown News*, on its 1 August front page, under the headline ‘G.A.A. Clubs to Continue Protests’, reported that it had contacted GAA members throughout Belfast, and that the ‘directive would not make the slightest difference to the clubs’ support for the hunger strikers.’ The newspaper quoted an unnamed ‘prominent G.A.A. official’ from Belfast who claimed that the directive would ‘make club members more determined to support the protests’, and that it was being viewed within Belfast as ‘an unwarranted intrusion in club affairs.’ The official continued that GAA members were ‘angry’ with the ‘illconsidered [sic] ruling’ and that it was ‘tantamount to a stab in the back, and the G.A.A. members in Belfast will certainly not let the matter rest.’ In its editorial, the *Andersonstown News* also criticised the directive and called for it to be ‘opposed vigorously at club and county level in an effort to preserve the national identity of the G.A.A.’ The newspaper called the directive ‘the culmination of years of undermining by the anti-Nationalist lobby in the organisation, who would like to see the G.A.A. abandon its national aspirations’.¹⁵³ Outside of Belfast, some clubs placed notices in the *Irish News* condemning the 4 June directive,¹⁵⁴ with St. Canice’s stating that ‘club facilities already available to the local H-Block Committee over these past four years will continue to be at their disposal.’

The *Andersonstown News* also published a letter, on 1 August, from Padraic O’Neill, who, presumably, is Patrick [Pat] O’Neill – the secretary of the South Antrim executive committee. O’Neill claimed that ‘pressure from “state bodies” and Gardai in the south’ had

¹⁵⁰ *Andersonstown News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁵¹ *Irish Press*, 30 July 1981.

¹⁵² *Irish News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁵³ *Andersonstown News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁵⁴ St Canice’s GFC (Derry), Pomeroy Plunketts GAC (Tyrone) and Pearses GFC (Derry), *Irish News*, 30 July 1981 & 31 July 1981.

caused 'the hierarchy of the G.A.A. to panic and fly in the face of the often stated views of G.A.A. members in the north on the H-Block crisis.' Stressing that GAA support for the H-Block prisoners was based on humanitarian grounds only, O'Neill suggested that 'if the G.A.A. is to be truly non-party political, then let all the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael T.D.s in the south resign their membership of the G.A.A.', and added that 'it is well known that politics and the G.A.A. are too well married in the Free State.' O'Neill also questioned the timing of the directive. It must be recalled that during the April 1981 Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election some GAA clubs in Northern Ireland publicly, and overtly, backed the candidacy of Bobby Sands. The leadership of the GAA, during this by-election, did not issue any directive banning GAA support for political candidates, despite a direct challenge from Sean Kilfeather to do so. The 4 June directive was only issued when it became apparent that the National H-Block Committee was going to run prisoner-candidates in the Republic of Ireland. O'Neill questioned why the GAA had waited until the Irish general election to 'publicly prohibit the H-Block campaign' and implied that electoral results, rather than GAA policy, was the main motivation behind the directive.¹⁵⁵

Surprisingly, Tom Woulfe, a consistent opponent of GAA involvement in any political matters, in particular the H-Block crisis, reacted negatively to the 4 June directive. On 29 July the *Irish Independent* carried a front-page story in which Woulfe claimed that the 4 June directive 'had made a bad situation worse' and that he was 'particularly shocked and upset because the organisation had changed its attitude when H-Block candidates had decided to test the democracy of the ballot box.' Woulfe claimed that 'the ordinary member doesn't know where he stands with the top brass at the moment' and called on the GAA to restore the ban on political participation.¹⁵⁶ It can only be assumed that Woulfe's position remained that the 4 June directive did not go far enough and that Woulfe believed the GAA should fully revert to its pre-1979 non-political stance. Woulfe, correctly, maintained that the 4 June directive confused GAA members as to whether they could, or could not, participate in the wider H-Block campaign.

Outside of the GAA, the National H-Block Committee and the republican movement also reacted to the public 'release' of the 4 June directive. The National H-Block Committee released a statement that they 'regretted the reported reversal of policy by the GAA in relation to their campaign in support of the prisoners' five demands' and reiterated that their

¹⁵⁵ *Andersonstown News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁵⁶ *Irish Independent*, 29 July 1981.

‘involvement in elections has only been in pursuance of the demands of the prisoners and has not been motivated by any other political considerations.’¹⁵⁷ The republican movement, through *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, did not condemn the GAA directive directly, but instead used the publicity surrounding the directive to call for unity amongst the nationalist community. *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, on its 1 August front page, under the headline ‘Unity Vital Against British’, stated that whilst appeals from the ‘Free State government’, the Catholic Church and the SDLP to Britain to take a ‘less inflexible position’ had failed, the ‘thinking within these three powerful bodies permeates the centre of Irish society’ and that the ‘GAA central council’s attempts to abandon the hunger strikers is just one example of the effect this thinking can have.’¹⁵⁸ In the same issue, however, in their ‘Portrait of a Hunger-Striker’, focusing on Paddy Quinn, the newspaper recalled that Quinn’s GAA club, Whitecross, had sent Quinn a radio when he was first imprisoned, in Crumlin Road Jail, and commented that ‘Quinn’s commitment to gaelic sport and his club’s recognition and appreciation of it, stands in stark contrast to the dishonest efforts of elements within the GAA this week to undercut the H-Block campaign by urging clubs to withdraw support.’¹⁵⁹

Patrick McFlynn, GAA president, reacted immediately to the public release of the 4 June directive, and to the Sean Kilfeather *Irish Times* article in particular. Eleven days before the ‘public release’ of the 4 June directive, the Coiste Bainistí had decided ‘that the Association should continue to pursue a just and humane solution without becoming aligned with any other grouping.’¹⁶⁰ On the same day the *Irish Times* article was published, 28 July, McFlynn released a statement in which he accused Kilfeather of ‘using one guideline in isolation’ which ‘shows neither understanding, concern nor regard for [the GAA’s] independent and unequivocal stance on this issue.’ McFlynn stated that Kilfeather’s article ‘gives the impression that the G.A.A. is no longer concerned with the sad situation in the H-Blocks – this is not the case’ and explained that ‘the advice, issued on June 4, referred to the fact that the National H-Block Committee had set up an election organisation to support candidates in the General Election and that because of that development it was not possible for G.A.A. clubs or other units to be involved’. McFlynn stressed that the GAA was ‘still making efforts at the highest levels to bring about a situation that will enable all our people to live in understanding, peace and harmony.’¹⁶¹ It must

¹⁵⁷ *Irish News*, 29 July 1981, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁵⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁶⁰ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 17 July 1981, CCMB (Part 2), p. 142.

¹⁶¹ GAA Press Release, 28 July 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

be noted that this statement was written before clubs and county boards reacted to the public release of the 4 June directive, and cannot therefore be attributed to the subsequent reactions detailed above. It appears that a copy of this statement was sent to county boards – the Meath county board, at their 17 August meeting, read McFlynn's 'statement 28th July 1981 relation to Associations [sic] stand on the sad situation in the H-Blocks.'¹⁶² McFlynn also appeared on RTÉ Radio, on 28 July, to clarify the GAA's position. During the course of this radio interview, McFlynn 'denied that its H-Block directive means it is no longer concerned with the humanitarian aspects of the prison issue.'¹⁶³

The furore caused by the public release of the 4 June directive ended, for the most part, on 30 July when McFlynn contacted the group Gaels Against the Blocks and 'clarified the matter.' Gaels Against the Blocks had scheduled a 'very important meeting of all G.A.A. concerned members'¹⁶⁴ in St. Pauls GFC (Belfast) clubhouse,¹⁶⁵ on 30 July, to 'formulate policy' in light of the GAA directive.¹⁶⁶ A spokesman for the group told the *Belfast Telegraph* that the meeting was 'called mainly to define policy on behalf of the Gaels in regard to the H-Block issue and to decide what they are going to do in reference to the ban being imposed by the GAA.'¹⁶⁷ Pat O'Neill told the *Irish Press* that the clubs in his area had not received 'any directive from Croke Park banning support for the hunger strike campaign' and that he was attending the meeting as 'We are the people whose relatives, whose members are in Long Kesh, and we have a duty to the 103 [sic] G.A.A. members and specifically the two hunger strikers to support them.' O'Neill also told the *Irish Press* that 'if Mr. McFlynn is telling us in the North that we are not to involve ourselves in the H-Block campaign, obviously we are in direct conflict with Croke Park. That would mean that we would continue and redouble our efforts on the prisoners' behalf and we will not shirk our responsibility towards the prisoners.'¹⁶⁸

At this meeting, however, the chairman of Gaels Against the Blocks informed attendees that 'contact had been made with the president of the [GAA]...who had clarified the matter.' McFlynn had explained to the chairman of Gaels Against the Blocks that, in response to a

¹⁶² Meath county board minutes, 17 August 1981. Meath County Board Minute Book, 1978-1982.

¹⁶³ *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 July 1981.

¹⁶⁴ *Andersonstown News*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁶⁵ It is somewhat unclear who scheduled this 30 July 1981 meeting – the *Irish News* (29 July 1981) reported that St. Pauls GFC called the meeting, whereas an advertisement in the *Andersonstown News* (1 August 1981) and an interview in the *Belfast Telegraph* (30 July 1981) indicate that Gaels Against the Blocks organised the meeting.

¹⁶⁶ *Irish News*, 29 July 1981.

¹⁶⁷ *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 July 1981.

¹⁶⁸ *Irish Press*, 31 July 1981.

‘number of county boards’ querying what the official position of the GAA was with regard to H-Blocks candidates, he had replied that ‘that the G.A.A. did not align themselves with any political party as they were a non-political organisation.’ McFlynn claimed that following this, ‘certain sections of the media had taken up the story and they distorted it. He stated that there never was any directive issued to any counties or clubs to withdraw their support from the protest.’¹⁶⁹ McFlynn’s explanation, according to the *Belfast Telegraph*, was fully accepted by all those attending the meeting. The *Belfast Telegraph* reported that the ‘apparent rift’ between the leadership of the GAA and the clubs in Antrim had been ‘totally resolved’, with an ‘unnamed spokesman’ telling the newspaper that the clubs ‘were satisfied there had been no withdrawal of support for the protesting prisoners in the Maze’ and that the clubs ‘totally accepted there had been a misunderstanding.’¹⁷⁰ The *Irish Times* and *Irish Independent* also reported on this development, with the *Irish Independent* reporting that the GAA ‘would continue to seek a “humanitarian and peaceful solution” to the crisis’ and ‘request a meeting with the Taoiseach, Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, about the matter.’¹⁷¹

Padraic [Pat] O’Neill wrote another letter to the *Andersonstown News*, published on 8 August, welcoming the fact that the ‘authorities in Croke Park on behalf of the G.A.A. have gone to pains to point out that no “directive” as such was issued to clubs and members instructing them to disassociate their support from the H-Block campaign’. O’Neill (unfairly) criticised the slow speed at which the GAA repudiated the *Irish Times* article and added that ‘the need for clarity was compulsory.’¹⁷² This call for clarity was also raised by Sean Kilfeather. He used his ‘Once a Week’ sports column to respond to McFlynn’s accusation that he had used ‘one guideline in isolation’ which showed ‘neither understanding, concern nor regard for [the GAA’s] independent and unequivocal stance on this issue.’ Kilfeather argued that ‘Croke Park’s red-faced embarrassment about the directive on H-Block candidates was inevitable and yet, apparently, took the GAA by complete surprise. It should not have done so and the whole thing could have been avoided if the GAA had not been so secretive about the whole business.’ Kilfeather claimed the GAA’s actions ‘defied all logic’ and explained that ‘here was a situation where, apparently, a number of County Board officers acted quite properly in asking headquarters for guidance on a sensitive issue’ and that ‘Croke Park, obviously, saw the dilemma but, instead of being open and above board about it, they wanted to keep the whole

¹⁶⁹ *Irish Press*, 31 July 1981.

¹⁷⁰ *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 July 1981.

¹⁷¹ *Irish Independent*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁷² *Andersonstown News*, 8 August 1981.

thing secret. So they sent a directive to the County Board and left it at that,' Kilfeather further stated that, before writing his 28 July article, he telephoned Croke Park 'at least three times' but he was refused the text of the directive. Kilfeather argued that 'had Croke Park made the directive available to the newspapers every GAA member in the country would know what the official line was; the news would have got to the members through Croke Park itself and the impression of having something to hide would not have been the result.'¹⁷³

The 4 June directive, and in particular its public release, once again highlighted the disparate opinion that existed within the GAA over the hunger strikes. At a national level, GAA officials were torn between political expediency and the letter of the association's rules, but at club level, particularly in the cases of clubs with members in prison or on hunger strike, local loyalties took precedent over the rulebook of the association. The wording of the directive, and Mulvihill's subsequent correspondence to Conway, indicates that the directive sought to ban all GAA involvement in the wider H-Block campaign. The directive clearly stated that, as the H-Block question had entered the 'party political arena', it was not possible for GAA members or units 'to be involved in any way of Riall 7 Treoraí Oifigiúil' and that 'until further notice, no club or unit should issue statements or show support in any other way for what has become a party political issue.' As discussed, however, McFlynn later claimed that the directive was only ever meant to apply to the GAA's involvement in the general election in the Republic of Ireland - shows of support for prisoner-candidates, in particular. McFlynn blamed the media, who had not seen the directive, for distorting the directive's meaning and the causing the resultant confusion and anger.

While McFlynn's explanation was 'totally accepted' by the Belfast GAA clubs, it raises two obvious questions. First, if the GAA was seeking to ban GAA involvement in the Republic of Ireland general election only, why was a clear directive not publicly issued (through the media) stating this? As discussed, the wording of the directive does not indicate that it applied to the general election only and it must be remembered that the directive was only issued by post to the county secretaries a mere seven days before the 11 June polling day. A clear, precise and publicly issued statement would have been a more efficient way of communicating the message to the GAA clubs and members, and could have prevented the confusion and anger that arose upon the directive's 'release'. Second, if the directive was only concerned with the GAA's participation in elections, why was a similar directive not issued during the election

¹⁷³ *Irish Times*, 7 August 1981.

campaign of Bobby Sands and the later campaign of Owen Carron? While it is plausible (but unlikely) that the GAA did not foresee, or prepare for, GAA involvement in the election campaign of Sands, and therefore could not have released a similar directive in advance of the campaign, no directive was issued before or during the August 1981 election campaign of Owen Carron in the Tyrone/South Fermanagh by-election that resulted from the death of Bobby Sands. As shall be discussed shortly, there were again GAA shows of support for Carron during his campaign. Similarly, why was a further directive not issued after the June election had ended stating that GAA clubs could resume their shows of support for the protesting-prisoners, if they so-wished?

When one looks at the evidence surrounding the directive, the conclusion can be reached that the meaning of the directive was purposely reinterpreted by McFlynn to quell the anger of the Belfast clubs. From all of the available evidence, it seems certain that when McFlynn contacted Gaels Against the Blocks to clarify the matter, the wording of the directive was not supplied to the GAA members in Belfast, but, instead, McFlynn assured them that the directive applied to the general election only. An 'unnamed spokesman', presumably Pat O'Neill, told the *Irish Independent* that GAA clubs in Antrim 'had been satisfied that there had been no directive about withdrawal of support for the protesting prisoners in Long Kesh',¹⁷⁴ O'Neill also told the *Andersonstown News* that he believed no such directive was issued by the GAA.¹⁷⁵ Clearly though, such a directive was issued. It appears that McFlynn reinterpreted the meaning of the directive, one month after the general election in the Republic of Ireland had ended, to apply to the general election only, in an effort to appease the Belfast clubs. Ironically, the GAA used the general election in an attempt to completely disengage the association from the H-Blocks campaign, but subsequently used the general election as their excuse to subdue the resultant anger.

In the immediate aftermath of the controversy that erupted over the 4 June directive, three hunger strikers died within eight days of each other. Kevin Lynch (Derry) died on 1 August, Kieran Doherty TD (Belfast) died on 2 August, while Thomas McElwee (Derry) died on 8 August. Later in the month, Michael Devine (Derry) died on 20 August; Devine was the tenth, and final, hunger striker to die. Two of these four hunger strikers, Lynch and Doherty were members of the GAA. As already discussed, GAA reaction to the deaths of the fifth (McDonnell) and sixth (Hurson) hunger strikers was somewhat muted. Similarly, neither the

¹⁷⁴ *Irish Independent*, 1 August 1981.

¹⁷⁵ *Andersonstown News*, 8 August 1981.

Central Council nor the Coiste Bainistí passed a vote of sympathy for any of the final four hunger strikers, including Lynch and Doherty. At provincial council level, the Connacht, Munster and Leinster councils did not pass a vote of sympathy with any of the final four hunger strikers. At county board level, the minutes for the August and September meetings of the Meath¹⁷⁶ and Sligo¹⁷⁷ county boards, who had both passed votes of sympathies with previous hunger strikers, do not contain a vote of sympathy with the final four hunger strikers. The *Anglo-Celt* does not mention if the Cavan or Monaghan county boards marked Doherty's death or attended his funeral – Kieran Doherty was the TD for the Cavan/Monaghan constituency.¹⁷⁸

This lack of a public expression of support for the dead hunger strikers was not confined to the GAA. Two weeks before the death of Kevin Lynch, a 'vicious and savage' riot at an 18 July H-Block demonstration in Ballsbridge, Dublin, resulted in injuries to 120 gardai and 80 protestors, and caused widespread revulsion throughout Ireland. The *Irish Independent*, in a front-page opinion piece, labelled the events the 'day of the imported thug',¹⁷⁹ while a letter writer to *Irish Independent* wrote that 'the cynical and suicidal Provisionals are seeking...to extend the Northern strife into the Republic.'¹⁸⁰ F. Stuart Ross, in *Smashing H-Block*, calls the riot 'the end of the road for broad-based demonstrations in the 26 counties.'¹⁸¹ While there is no evidence to support it, the theory must be at least considered that the Ballsbridge riot led to the leaking of the existence of the GAA's 4 June directive to the press. This could have been done in an attempt to highlight that the GAA had already disassociated itself from the H-Blocks campaign. After the deaths of Lynch and Doherty a rally of 'about 400 people' was held outside the GPO in Dublin, on 4 August, with the main speaker, veteran republican Joe Cahill, later recalling that he 'remember[ed] being disappointed at the crowd that turned out – it was quite small.'¹⁸² This lack of public expression was not consistent throughout Ireland: over 2,000 people marched through Cork city on 4 August in honour of Lynch and Doherty, while several thousand attended the funerals of both men.

¹⁷⁶ Meath county board minutes, 17 August 1981 & 7 September 1981, Meath County Board Minute Book, 1978-1982.

¹⁷⁷ Sligo county board minutes, 7 August 1981 & 7 September 1981, Sligo County Board Minute Book, 1977-1985.

¹⁷⁸ *Anglo-Celt*, 7 August 1981.

¹⁷⁹ *Irish Independent*, 20 July 1981.

¹⁸⁰ *Irish Independent*, 22 July 1981.

¹⁸¹ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 140.

¹⁸² Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 141.

There was, however, some GAA reaction to the final four deaths at county board and club level in Ulster. No GAA clubs placed a notice of sympathy in the *Irish News* exclusive to Thomas McElwee or Michael Devine, but following the death of Kevin Lynch, the North Derry board,¹⁸³ the Derry county board¹⁸⁴ and several GAA clubs¹⁸⁵ placed sympathy notices in the *Irish News* offering their sympathies to the Lynch family. The group 'South Antrim GAA Against H-Block' also placed a notice in the *Irish News* extending 'deepest sympathy' to the families and relatives of Lynch and Doherty.¹⁸⁶ At the funeral of Kevin Lynch, held on 3 August, Sean Flynn, Belfast city councillor and vice-chairman of the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), stated in his graveside oration that 'the Derry...and South Antrim county board[s] asked for a minutes' [sic] silence before the All-Ireland hurling semi-final between Limerick and Galway' but that this request had been refused by 'Croke Park'. Flynn called Lynch 'a true great Gael' and stated that the IRSP would 'work tirelessly for the GAA to act positively in pursuit of the five just demands.'¹⁸⁷ The week following Lynch's death, members of the St. Patrick's Hurling Club (Dungiven) held a meeting and unanimously decided, with the approval of Lynch's father, Paddy Lynch, to change the name of their club to Kevin Lynch's Hurling Club. Liam Hinphey, a founding member of St. Patrick's Hurling Club, explained that the decision to change the name of the club was not a political statement but rather 'an emotional response to what we thought was [Lynch's] own particular brand of heroism and generosity', and that it was 'an attempt to honour a team mate...[and]...to in some way identify with the Lynch family and their tragic position.'¹⁸⁸

Gaelic games in Armagh, Tyrone, Antrim and Derry were cancelled or curtailed the weekend (8/9 August) following the deaths of Kevin Lynch and Kieran Doherty. While the South Armagh Hunger Strikers Action Committee 'thanked and commended' the 'principled' decision to cancel all games within Armagh, and congratulated all of the Armagh clubs on 'their complete compliance with the County Board's decision',¹⁸⁹ the cancelling of games was not universally appreciated. A letter from a 'Lurgan Gael' appeared in the 21 August *Irish News*, in which the writer stated that he wished to 'express [his] concern at the way our games

¹⁸³ *Irish News*, 17 August 1981.

¹⁸⁴ *Irish News*, 4 August 1981.

¹⁸⁵ St. Patrick's Hurling Club (Derry), St. Canice's GAA club (Derry), St. Teresa's GAC (Belfast), Michael Davitt's GAC (Derry), Teconnaught GAC (Down) and St. Mary's GAC (Derry). *Irish News*, 3 August 1981, 4 August 1981, 5 August 1981 & 6 August 1981.

¹⁸⁶ *Irish News*, 6 August 1981.

¹⁸⁷ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 8 August 1981.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Liam Hinphey, Dungiven, 14 February 2014.

¹⁸⁹ *Newry Reporter*, 6 August 1981.

are being disrupted by the Hunger Strike.’ ‘Lurgan Gael’ wrote that the postponement of games following the deaths of the hunger strikers was depriving the young people of Armagh ‘the opportunity of playing our national games’ and he feared that ‘there is a very real danger of young people drifting away to play other games, possible [sic] never to return to Gaelic sport.’ ‘Lurgan Gael’ further wrote that ‘anyone could be forgiven if they were to come to the conclusion that the G.A.A. was not its own master, but simply a tool to be used by the I.R.A. and I.N.L.A. for propaganda purposes’ and warned that the ‘Armagh County Board will have to grasp this nettle, show some moral courage and get on with the job they were chosen to do. If they fail to do so, they will have lost all credibility, and at least one official.’¹⁹⁰ The Armagh county board did lose two officials in September 1981 but not for the reasons ‘Lurgan Gael’ suggested. At the 17 September Armagh county board meeting, Tommy Lynch, vice-chairman of the county committee, and his brother, Paddy Lynch,¹⁹¹ tendered their resignations ‘because of the attitude of the leadership, at national level, to the H-Block situation.’ Members of the Armagh county committee ‘expressed sincere regret that their long and dedicated service to the Association in the county should end in this way.’¹⁹²

Sympathy was also expressed with the dead hunger strikers on at least one GAA pitch. The *Irish Independent*¹⁹³ and *Andersonstown News* both reported that, at the request of the Monaghan H-Block committee, there was a two-minute silence in memory of Kevin Lynch at the start of the second half of the Monaghan senior football championship game between Scotstown and Truagh, at Clones on 2 August, and that ‘some of the Scotstown and Truagh players took part in the H-Block parade on the pitch at half-time.’¹⁹⁴ The staging of this demonstration resulted in a member of the public, P. Walsh, writing a letter to the *Irish News*, published on 6 August, in which he urged the GAA to ‘have the courage of its convictions’ and put a complete end to H-Block demonstrations at GAA matches. Walsh, who explained that he had not attended a GAA match in Casement Park since witnessing a H-Block demonstration in the stadium in 1978, argued that GAA supporters ‘must be allowed to enjoy our sport in peace’ and ‘must not be forced to support one political line or another, or made seem to support one political line or another.’ Walsh forecasted that the GAA would lose more supporters if the demonstrations were not stopped, and opined that the National H-Block Committee could not

¹⁹⁰ *Irish News*, 21 August 1981.

¹⁹¹ The *Armagh Examiner*, reporting on the death of Paddy Lynch, called Lynch ‘one of Armagh’s most respected and dedicated Gaels’ and also a ‘respected Irish republican.’ *Armagh Examiner*, 4 April 2006.

¹⁹² Armagh County Board Minutes, 17 September 1981. Armagh County Board Minute Book, 1978-1988.

¹⁹³ *Irish Independent*, 3 August 1981.

¹⁹⁴ *Andersonstown News*, 8 August 1981.

‘muster a half decent crowd of their own’ and, as such, they were ‘taking-over’ GAA grounds so that they ‘were then able to claim that thousands of people attended their “protest.”’¹⁹⁵

The Coiste Bainistí met on 28/29 August and discussed the hunger strike and the effect the strike was having on games in Ulster. At this meeting, a 14 August letter from Declan Kelly, private secretary to An Taoiseach, to Liam Mulvihill was discussed. In this letter, Kelly informed Mulvihill that, in response to his phone call requesting a meeting between An Taoiseach and McFlynn, An Taoiseach regretted that due to ‘commitments and a short holiday’ such a meeting was not possible. Kelly instead suggested that McFlynn meet with ‘Professor Dooge, Minister designate for Foreign Affairs...at the earliest mutually convenient date to discuss the H-Block issue’ and that An Taoiseach hoped to meet McFlynn at a future date.¹⁹⁶ The Coiste Bainistí noted the contents of the letter concerning ‘two future meetings (1. An tUachtaran, Ard-Stiurthoir agus P Ó hAirt with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and 2. An tUachtaran agus P. Ó hAirt with An Taoiseach)’ before hearing a verbal report from McFlynn on ‘the meeting which he, P. Ó hAirt and C. Ó Neill had attended in Muineachain, on 13.8.1981, with Cathaorligh Choistí Co. (Uladh) C.L.G.’ The Coiste Bainistí also ‘noted that despite the damage caused by a national newspaper article, which misrepresented the situation, our Ulster Counties are doing everything possible to ensure that games schedules are adhered to despite intense pressure, in certain instances, to have games cancelled.’¹⁹⁷

The deaths of the final four hunger strikers did not generate the same publicity as the deaths of the first hunger strikers: while the death of Bobby Sands made national and international headlines, the *Irish Independent* afforded the death of Michael Devine a single paragraph on its back page, and the event did not even merit its own headline.¹⁹⁸ In addition to declining publicity, the deaths of the final four hunger strikers were marked by the fragmentation of the nationalist community. F. Stuart Ross explains that following the first eight deaths, ‘critics of the anti-H-Block campaign grew more and more vocal’ and that while

for a brief moment, the H-Block hunger strikes had facilitated “a coming together of normally divided sections of the northern nationalist community”...as the protest continued to drag on, many moderates were of the opinion that neither Thatcher nor the hunger strikers would budge. What is more, they were deeply concerned as to what effect the protest was having on their community and society at large.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ *Irish News*, 6 August 1981.

¹⁹⁶ Letter from Declan Kelly to Liam Mulvihill, 14 August 1981. H-Block File, GAA Library and Archive.

¹⁹⁷ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 28-29 August 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 2), p. 212.

¹⁹⁸ ‘Derry H-Block group appeals for end to violence’, *Irish Independent*, 21 August 1981.

¹⁹⁹ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, pp. 141-142.

In the Republic of Ireland, the 18 July Ballsbridge riot had a real effect on the public's opinion of the H-Block campaign and marked the end of the movement in the Republic. This change of attitude towards the H-Block movement, and the hunger strikers, was also reflected within the GAA, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. This is most evident in the minute books of the various GAA units: having released statements and passed votes of condolences with Bobby Sands (who was not a GAA member), no such consideration was shown to GAA members, Kevin Lynch and Kieran Doherty. Within the Ulster, however, tangible signs of support for the hunger strikers continued to be maintained by the four GAA county boards of Derry, Tyrone, Antrim and Armagh.

The death of Michael Devine (20 August) marked the beginning-of-the-end of the 1981 hunger strike, although the hunger strike did not officially end until 3 October. Throughout the final two months of the hunger strike, August and September 1981, some GAA clubs continued their involvement in the wider H-Block campaign, most notably a week-long fast and vigil organised by Gaels Against the Blocks. H-Block campaigners continued to use Gaelic games as a platform for their message during this period, while, in September 1981, Joe Keohane briefly re-opened the 'political debate' by formally joining the National H-Block Committee.

Throughout August and September 1981, some GAA clubs²⁰⁰ continued to place notices of support for the hunger strikers in the *Irish News*. Similarly, the Derry county board released a statement deploring the lack of initiative to resolve the hunger strike, and demanding more action and negotiation from the Irish and British government to bring the 'impasse to an end.'²⁰¹ The 'Committee of [South Antrim] GAA Clubs against H-Block' informed the Antrim executive committee, on 11 August, that a vigil-fast would be held outside the lower gate of Casement Park between 17 August and 23 August (inclusive) between 10am and 10pm.²⁰² In a letter to *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, the 'South Antrim GAA Committee against the H-Blocks' explained that the seven day fast would involve members from twenty-two clubs²⁰³ from the South Antrim area, manning the vigil-fast in rotation. The Committee, noting the

²⁰⁰ Eoghan Ruadh Hurling Club (Tyrone), Moortown St. Malachy GFC (Tyrone), St. Colm's Hurling Club (Derry), St. Gall's GAC (Belfast), Kickhams GFC Creggan (Antrim), Cardineal Ui Dhonail CLCG (Belfast), Erin's Own GAC (Antrim) and Shamrocks GAC (Derry). *Irish News*, 6 August 1981, 7 August 1981, 15 August 1981, 25 August 1981, 8 September 1981 & 9 September 1981.

²⁰¹ *Irish News*, 9 September 1981.

²⁰² Antrim Executive Committee minutes, 11 August 1981.

²⁰³ *An Phoblacht/Republican News* listed the twenty-two participating clubs as: O'Donnells, McDermotts, Derriaghy, Rossa, Clonard, Davitts, St Agnes, St Pauls, Gael Uladh, O'Connells, Dwyers, Lamh Dearg, Pearses, St Endas, St Therasas, Gort na Mona, Ardoyne, John Mitchells, Riverdale Rovers, Sarsfields, St Galls, St Malachys.

'anger...felt by many Northern Gaels after the alleged [4 June] directive' invited other clubs and members to attend and support the vigil-fast.²⁰⁴

During this seven day vigil-fast, according to the *Andersonstown News*, the 'British Army continually harassed [the protestors]. They tried to run the members down on the white line picket and finally fired two plastic bullets at them without any provocation of any kind.'²⁰⁵ While the newspapers do not give attendance figures for each day of the demonstration, the *Irish News* reported that 'about 40' GAA members attended the second day (18 August) of the demonstration.²⁰⁶ The week-long demonstration concluded with a 'march...from Casement Park to the Gaelic pitches on the Shaw's Road in Andersonstown, where a hurling match was played between a South Antrim and a North Antrim team. A social evening then followed in the club rooms of St. Paul's GAA club.' *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, having previously explained that the fast was held to demonstrate that GAA members support the prisoners 'despite the hostile noises from the GAA bureaucracy in Dublin',²⁰⁷ called the vigil 'successful and well organised' and commented that the 'week of activity is a clear and encouraging indication of the solid grassroots support existing for the hunger-strikers among GAA ranks.'²⁰⁸

The group, Antrim GAA Against H-Block placed a front page advertisement in the 28 August edition of the *Irish News*, in which they thanked members of the public 'for their generosity and patience during the week', reaffirmed their support for the H-Block prisoners, and called upon 'County and Club teams to observe a minute's silence at their Club games this Sunday.'²⁰⁹ While there is no evidence that a minute's silence was held at any of the 30 August club or county games,²¹⁰ the Dublin H-Block Committee, throughout August and September, organised a series of protests connected to GAA matches taking place at Croke Park. Both the 2 August Galway v Limerick hurling²¹¹ and 23 August Down v Offaly football²¹² games were picketed by H-Block campaigners.

²⁰⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 15 August 1981.

²⁰⁵ *Andersonstown News*, 29 August 1981.

²⁰⁶ *Irish News*, 19 August 1981.

²⁰⁷ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 22 August 1981.

²⁰⁸ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 29 August 1981.

²⁰⁹ *Irish News*, 28 August 1981.

²¹⁰ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, which meticulously reported on protests at GAA grounds, does not report on any minutes silence held during the weekend. It is entirely possible that minutes silence were held at games, but not reported.

²¹¹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 8 August 1981.

²¹² *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 29 August 1981.

In September 1981, as usual, the two All-Ireland finals were played in Croke Park. On 6 September Galway and Offaly contested the hurling final, while on 20 September 1981 Kerry and Offaly contested the football final. Patrick McFlynn, in his autobiography, *Leading Through the Troubles*, states that in August 1981 a deputation from Gaels Against the Blocks visited his house in Down. They demanded, he claimed, that black flags be flown at both All-Ireland finals and that McFlynn, in his capacity as GAA president, should make a speech on behalf of the H-Block prisoners at the half-time intervals of the games. McFlynn, who had advance notice of these demands, told the Gaels Against the Blocks delegates that their demands would not be met as 'it was something which would have offended many people at the game.'²¹³ While there is no evidence for any protests being held at the hurling final, *An Phoblacht/Republican News* reported that at the football final H-Block leaflets were handed out and that there were 'a number of hunger-strike banners around the ground'. The newspaper also reported that there was 'a brief intervention on the pitch during half-time in support of the hunger-strikers.'²¹⁴ The *Irish Times* reported less dramatically that this 'intervention on the pitch' consisted of 'two H-Block protestors carrying a banner proclaiming that there were 179 GAA members on the blanket' but that the protestors 'got little attention.'²¹⁵ The Coiste Bainistí, at their October meeting discussed this H-Block protest and congratulated the pitch stewards 'for their tact and diplomacy in dealing with the situation.'²¹⁶

Throughout the August 1981 Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election, held as a result of the death of Bobby Sands, Joe Keohane campaigned prominently on behalf of the National H-Block Committee candidate, and eventual winner, Owen Carron. The *Irish Independent*, on 21 August, reported that Keohane was 'strongly rebuked by leading members of the G.A.A.' following his appeal in Belcoo, Fermanagh for 'all members of the G.A.A. to show the Association was 100 per cent behind the H Block prisoners' demands.' The *Irish Independent* reported that Tom Woulfe called for Keohane to be censured and that Woulfe 'did not believe [Keohane] is speaking for the G.A.A. or the Kerry County Board.' Frank King, chairman of the Kerry county board, told the *Irish Independent* that 'The Kerry County Board is abiding by the directive issued by the Association at Central Council level. Any statements issued by [Keohane] are personal and do not reflect our policy.'²¹⁷

²¹³ MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles*, p. 18.

²¹⁴ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 26 September 1981.

²¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 21 September 1981.

²¹⁶ Coiste Bainistí minutes, 9-10 October 1981, CCMB 1981 (Part 2), p. 255.

²¹⁷ *Irish Independent*, 21 August 1981.

Keohane was criticised again in September 1981, this time by Senator John A. Murphy, when Keohane became a member of the National H-Block Committee, although on this occasion McFlynn publicly defended Keohane. The National H-Block Committee held an emergency recall conference on 6 September, at which the 1,000 delegates were asked to 'redouble...[their] efforts and energies, both nationally and internationally.'²¹⁸ At this conference Labhras Ó Murchú, president of Comhaltas Ceolteoirí na hÉireann, Tomás MacAnna, Director of the National Theatre, Seán MacMathúna, Conradh na Gaeilge, and Joe Keohane all joined the committee. *An Phoblacht/Republican News* welcomed this development and commented that 'The addition of the leading figures from the Irish language, music and theatrical scene along with leading GAA member, Joe Keohane...gives the H-Block/Armagh campaign an outstanding opportunity of broadening support in these vital areas.'²¹⁹

The *Irish Independent*, on 8 September, under the front-page headline 'Row as GAA star joins H-Block Committee', reported that Senator John A. Murphy had commented that it was 'disastrous that such a prominent GAA figure should be on this committee. I don't see how you can be a H-Block activist without implicitly favouring and giving aid to members of organisations such as the I.R.A. and the I.N.L.A.' Murphy added that he considered it 'most undesirable that any member of the Association should be associated with the H-Blocks campaign', and suggested that 'GAA Headquarters should clarify its position on this matter.' GAA president McFlynn defended Keohane's right to become a member of the National H-Block Committee: McFlynn told the *Irish Independent* that 'GAA members are free to join any strictly political organisation that they wish and he felt the H-Blocks Committee came within this guideline.' Frank King also defended Keohane's decision, stating that 'as far as he was concerned Mr. Keohane was a member of a political organisation and he did not see any conflict between this and his involvement with the GAA.'²²⁰ King, somewhat unbelievably, added that 'Politics has never created any problems within the GAA in Kerry and long may that situation continue.'²²¹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, when reporting on this 'row', called Murphy an 'anti-republican senator' and praised McFlynn and King's defence of

²¹⁸ Ross, *Smashing H-Block*, p. 145.

²¹⁹ *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 19 September 1981.

²²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 8 September 1981.

²²¹ For a detailed history of the detrimental effect politics had of the GAA in Kerry between 1884 and 1934, see Richard McElligott, *Forging a Kingdom. The GAA in Kerry, 1884-1934* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2013). See also Hanley, 'Irish Republican attitudes to sport since 1921' in McAnallen, Hassan & Hegarty (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA Ulaidh*, pp. 175-184.

Keohane, adding that it was 'hardly surprising...in an organisation which has launched countless politicians on the basis of their prowess on the playing field.'²²²

Throughout September 1981, a number of factors led to the ending of the hunger strike. On 6 September, the INLA announced that no more of its prisoners would embark on the hunger strike.²²³ More importantly, the families of hunger strikers Matt Devlin (4 September) and Laurence McKeown (6 September) intervened in their hunger strikes and requested medical assistance, while Liam McCloskey ended his own hunger strike, on 26 September, after his parents informed him they would intervene if he lapsed into a coma.²²⁴ Father Denis Faul, an assistant prison chaplain in Long Kesh, met with the relatives of five of the six men still on hunger strike and secured a commitment that these families would sanction 'medical intervention if they failed to talk their sons off the fast.'²²⁵ A meeting was held between Brendan McFarlane, Prison OC, and five of the six remaining hunger strikers (Pat Sheehan was too ill to attend) with the decision taken to end the hunger strike. This happened on 3 October.

During the latter stage of the 1981 hunger strike, a serious difference of opinion as to how the GAA could, and should, react to the hunger strike, became apparent between GAA units in Northern Ireland and the leadership of the GAA. When the 4 June directive was issued, clubs in Northern Ireland openly flouted it. Belfast clubs in particular saw it as an 'unwarranted intrusion in club affairs.' Similarly, the July Ballsbridge riot turned many moderate nationalists, including GAA members, away from the H-Block movement, particularly in the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, however, GAA clubs continued to express support for the hunger strikers, although there was not universal support. As seen, GAA members themselves were opposed to the cancellation of games and demonstrations taking place at games.

IV.

In the lengthy statement that announced the end of the hunger strike, the republican prisoners strongly criticised the 'Irish Establishment, consisting of the Catholic Church, the Dublin Government and the SDLP'. The prisoners thanked the 'National H-Block/Armagh

²²² *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 12 September 1981.

²²³ In their statement, the INLA explained that they had only 28 protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks and that if they continued to maintain the ratio of one hunger striker for every three IRA hunger strikers, all INLA prisoners in the H-Blocks would be dead within six months. The INLA pledged support for the hunger strikers and stated that if the hunger strike continued, the group may re-join, albeit at a lower ratio. *Irish Independent*, 6 September 1981.

²²⁴ *Sunday Independent*, 27 September 1981.

²²⁵ *Irish Press*, 3 October 1981.

Committee, the H-Block movement, the nationalist people of Ireland and all those who championed our cause abroad' and requested that these people continue to work towards the five demands.²²⁶ The National H-Block Committee released their own statement announcing that their campaign would continue and reaffirmed 'its pledge...to build a campaign in Ireland and internationally which will win...[the prisoner's five] just demands.' Similar to the ending of the 1980 hunger strike, neither the republican prisoners nor the National H-Block Committee thanked or condemned the GAA. This section will analyse the reaction of the GAA to the ending of the hunger strike. It will analyse county and provincial conventions in an attempt to ascertain if the hunger strike affected the GAA as a whole or it only affected individual clubs and county boards.

At national level, there was no immediate reaction from the GAA to the ending of the hunger strike. Neither the Coiste Bainisti²²⁷ nor the Central Council²²⁸ discussed the ending of the hunger strike at their October meetings. GAA county conventions were held throughout December 1981 and January and February 1982, while provincial conventions were held in February 1982, with the GAA Annual Congress held on 27 and 28 March 1982. An analysis of the proceedings of the county and provincial conventions reveals that the hunger strike was only discussed in detail by four Ulster counties and the Ulster Council. It must be noted however that, unlike the ending of the 1980 hunger strike, there was a considerable passage of time between the ending of the 1981 hunger strike and the holding of conventions and, furthermore, the 1980 county conventions were held in the immediate aftermath of a high-profile public row between the GAA and the GRA.

Outside of Ulster, the hunger strike, and the various related H-Blocks issues, was referred to at only five county conventions – Roscommon, Longford, Cork, Mayo and Dublin. At the Roscommon convention a motion was passed 'reasserting the legitimate aspiration of the Irish people to a united Ireland, and categorically rejecting violence as a means of achieving this aim.'²²⁹ While the chairman of the Longford county board mentioned the hunger strike in passing,²³⁰ Frank Murphy placed the hunger strike in the context of the GAA's 'clear policy of support for the ideal of the re-unification of our country...by peaceful means only' and told

²²⁶ Campbell, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, pp. 259-264.

²²⁷ Coiste Bainisti minutes, 9-10 October 1981 & 24 October 1981. CCMB 1981 (Part 2), pp. 254 – 264 & 299 – 309.

²²⁸ Central Council minutes, 10 October 1981. CCMB 1981 (Part 2), pp. 265 – 277.

²²⁹ *Irish Independent*, 18 January 1982.

²³⁰ *Longford Leader*, 18 December 1981 & 31 December 1981.

delegates that if the GAA 'abandons our national principles and confine ourselves merely to the organisation of games – it will have lost its very soul.'²³¹ At the Mayo county convention, a motion to restore Rule 7 to its original 'non-political' form was defeated,²³² whereas at the Dublin convention, Tom Woulfe (Civil Service Club) succeeded in getting a motion passed that the word 'party' should be deleted from Rule 7 of the GAA official guide. Woulfe called the GAA's 'incursion into H-Blocks politics' a 'blatant breach of the GAA's charter' and stated that the purpose of his motion was to restate in terms clear from confusion that the GAA has no business dabbling in activities not set out in the official guide.'²³³ Woulfe's motion was forwarded for consideration at the Annual Congress, where, as shall be discussed, it was defeated.

Within Ulster, the hunger strike was discussed, to varying degrees, at the Derry, Down, Tyrone and Antrim county conventions and also at the Ulster provincial convention. Tellingly, the matter was not raised at the Donegal, Cavan or Monaghan conventions. While the Armagh secretary, Gerry Fagan, did not mention the hunger strike directly in his annual report, he did regret the resignation of Tommy and Paddy Lynch and added that 'they resigned not from any dissatisfaction with the committee and its activities but rather with policy as dictated at higher level.'²³⁴ The Down chairman, Benny Crawford, criticised other county secretaries for not releasing the 4 June directive to their respective clubs, and claimed that Down was the 'only county to follow the directive of Croke Park.'²³⁵ Patsy Mulholland (South Derry Divisional secretary),²³⁶ John McGlinchey (Derry secretary),²³⁷ Padraic O'Neill (South Antrim Divisional secretary),²³⁸ Hugh McPoland (Antrim chairman)²³⁹ and Brendan Harkin (Tyrone chairman)²⁴⁰ all lamented the deaths of the hunger strikers in the reports and addresses to their respective county conventions, with McGlinchey critical of the manner in which the GAA president, Derry born McFlynn, was treated by the media during the crisis.

Michael Feeney, in his secretary's report to the 1982 Ulster convention, held on 28 February, mentioned the hunger strike, but only in the context of the effect it had on the GAA

²³¹ *Cork Examiner*, 28 January 1982 & 2 March 1982.

²³² *Irish Independent*, 11 January 1982.

²³³ *Irish Independent*, 21 December 1981.

²³⁴ *Irish Times*, 11 December 1981.

²³⁵ *Irish News*, 18 January 1982.

²³⁶ *Irish News*, 29 December 1981.

²³⁷ *Irish News*, 12 January 1982.

²³⁸ *Irish News*, 17 December 1981.

²³⁹ *Irish News*, 25 January 1982.

²⁴⁰ *Ulster Herald*, 30 January 1982.

within the province. Feeney called the hunger strike a 'tragedy' and wrote that 'it must be regarded as nothing short of miraculous that it was at all possible to complete a full programme of activities.' Feeney praised the members of the Ulster Council for their 'sensitivity' and 'wholehearted support and loyalty' during 'one of the most trying years of the Council's history.' In the final paragraph of his report, Feeney offered the condolences of the council to a number of named officials and players who had passed away during 1981, including Frank Maguire, but the Ulster GAA members who died on hunger strike were not named. The sympathies of the Ulster Council were, however, also offered to 'the relatives of all our members bereaved during 1981' with a mass offered 'for the souls of the deceased members of the G.A.A. in Ulster' in the Church of Saint Patrick, Donegal, on the morning of the convention.²⁴¹

Liam Mulvihill, in his report to the 1982 Annual Congress, held on 27/28 March, called the hunger strike 'a long festering sore which left considerable marks on the Association during the year.' Completely ignoring the furore that surrounded the 4 June directive, Mulvihill commented that while GAA officials in Northern Ireland 'were subjected to intense pressure...from people that felt that more sympathy should be shown with the cause of the prisoners', it was 'to the credit of the County Committees and the leading officials [that] the Management Committee policy was accepted and the Association came through a severe test of its unity.'²⁴² When discussing Mulvihill's report, at the Annual Congress, Frank Murphy (Cork) complimented Mulvihill for including the 'H-Block' paragraph but criticised an unnamed 'individual member of the Association', presumably Tom Woulfe, for waging an 'unfair' campaign against the GAA's attitude to 'things that they might term National issues.' Later in the Congress two motions were considered that marked the end of the GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks crisis. In response to a Roscommon motion that the GAA rejects violence as a means of achieving a united Ireland, the amendment that the GAA 'condemns all violence in Ireland' was passed instead, following objections from the Cork, Kerry, Armagh and Antrim delegates that the original motion did not address British Army or RUC violence. Paddy Downey, *Irish Times* journalist, called the passing of this motion 'the most significant happening' at the Congress and that it effectively 'wiped out' the 1979 motion that the GAA supported the 'struggle for national liberation.'²⁴³ The next motion considered at the Congress

²⁴¹ Secretary's report to the 1982 Ulster Convention, Donegal, 28 February 1982.

²⁴² Report of the Ard Stiurthoir to the 1982 Annual Congress, p. 4A. GAA Library and Archive.

²⁴³ *Irish Times*, 29 March 1982.

was the Dublin motion that proposed changing Rule 7 to its pre-1979 'non-political', rather than 'non-party-political', stance. Delegates from Cork, Mayo, Tipperary and Armagh spoke out against the motion, with no county delegate speaking in favour of it. (Tom Woulfe was not present at the 1982 Annual Congress.) The defeat of this motion marked the end of the GAA's direct involvement in the hunger strike crisis.²⁴⁴

An analysis of the 1981/1982 GAA county and provincial conventions, and the proceedings of the 1982 Annual Congress, highlight that the 1981 hunger strike directly affected counties in Northern Ireland only, as would be expected. This chapter has detailed the pressure that the GAA came under, from the National H-Block Committee, Sinn Féin, the republican prisoners and some GAA members, to publicly support the demands of the 1981 hunger strikers. While the GAA, at national level, was initially willing to allow clubs and county boards to lend limited support to the prisoners' campaign, the entry of prisoner-candidates in the 1981 general election in the Republic of Ireland changed the dynamic of the relationship between the GAA and the H-Block campaign. The resultant directive, however, was condemned, directly challenged and openly ignored by clubs and county boards in Northern Ireland, the Belfast clubs in particular. The fact that the directive was issued in response to the general election in the Republic of Ireland, but only challenged by clubs and county boards in Northern Ireland is in itself telling of the differing attitudes within the GAA, on both sides of the political border. In many ways, the hunger strike was the first regional political crisis that the GAA faced – past political crises, including the 1887 split, the Parnell controversy, the Irish Civil War and the 1938 removal of Douglas Hyde as a patron of the association, affected the association on a national basis. Similarly, the issue of Irish political prisoners was treated as a national GAA issue up until the release of the internees in 1975, but it became an 'Ulster issue' when the internees were released.

Kevin Howard, in his article 'Competitive sports: the territorial politics of Irish cycling' labels the GAA a 'boundary-denying thirty-two county' organisation that is characterised 'by regarding partition as an illegitimate and ultimately unsustainable imposition; it is paradigmatically irredentist and it ignores rather than accommodates ethnic difference.'²⁴⁵ The H-Blocks crisis, the 1981 hunger strike in particular, forced home the reality that no matter

²⁴⁴ GAA 1982 Annual Congress Minutes, pp. 30-33. GAA Library and Archive.

²⁴⁵ Kevin Howard, 'Competitive sports: the territorial politics of Irish cycling' in John Coakley and Liam O'Dowd (eds.), *Crossing the Border: New Relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), pp.227-244.

how much the GAA 'denied' the border, the real politic of the situation was that the GAA was operating in two very different sets of political circumstances. While the abstract notion of 'nationalism' can be hard to define, Paul Lawrence, in *Nationalism: History and Theory*, has offered three possible definitions whereby nationalism might 'refer simply to an abstract ideology that has historically concerned itself with the belief that humanity is divided into nations and considered how they should be defined'; it can 'also denote a political doctrine – the belief not only that homogenous, identifiable nations exist, but that they should govern themselves', and, finally, nationalism 'can be used more broadly to signify the sentiment felt by many people of belonging to a particular nation on a daily basis.'²⁴⁶ While the GAA has always considered itself, and claimed to be, a nationalist but non-political (or, post-1979, non-party-political) organisation, the H-Blocks crisis, for the first time, exposed the inherent flaws in trying to hold these two positions. In the Republic of Ireland, where all political parties are somewhat nationalist in nature, the GAA's nationalist ideology could co-exist with its non-political / non-party political ethos, but in Northern Ireland, where to be a 'nationalist' invariably meant taking one side of the 'political question', nationalism was political. The contradiction of the GAA defining itself as a nationalist but non-political association was exposed during the H-Blocks crisis, when the association came under pressure, from northern nationalism, to involve itself in a campaign that was seen by many within both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as political in nature.

Furthermore, the hunger strikes clearly showed that the troubles faced by the GAA in Northern Ireland were either ignored, not appreciated or misunderstood by the majority of GAA members in the Republic of Ireland. As shown in this chapter, the vast majority of the county boards in the Republic of Ireland were completely indifferent to the crisis that had consumed Northern Ireland, with some county boards and officials criticising the response of northern clubs and officials, without fully realising the daily pressures such clubs were facing. This chapter has further shown that even within Northern Ireland the hunger strike affected some counties more than others, with the Antrim, Tyrone, Derry and Armagh GAA affected to much a greater degree than Fermanagh and Down. This is reflective of the reaction of Northern Irish nationalism to the hunger strikes whereby the different facets of this nationalism reacted in a different manner to the crisis.

²⁴⁶ Paul Lawrence, *Nationalism: History and Theory* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2005), p. 3.

Conclusion

While it is generally acknowledged that the H-Blocks crisis, the 1981 hunger strike in particular, had a lasting legacy on the history of modern Ireland and Irish republicanism, this conclusion will explore if the crisis had a lasting impact on the GAA. This conclusion will question if the crisis affected the GAA's medium to long term external relationships with the Irish and British governments and their security forces, the republican and loyalist communities in Northern Ireland, and the media. It will also analyse if the crisis changed the GAA; it will ask if the crisis affected the relationship between the GAA in Northern Ireland and the GAA in the Republic of Ireland. It will also question if the crisis influenced or changed the policies of the association and if the crisis affected the association's image of itself and its sense of purpose.

I.

While the hunger strikes were 'more of a problem for Dublin than for London',¹ both governments determinedly sought a solution to the crisis. During this period, the effects the hunger strikes were having on the welfare and unity of the GAA, and the potential contribution that the GAA could make to help end the crisis, were peripheral to the attempts of the two governments to end the overall H-Blocks crisis. This is acknowledged by both Liam Mulvihill and Peter Quinn. The Ulster Council, according to Quinn, 'did not think that the GAA was a priority [for the governments] so much as getting a resolution to the hunger strikes was a priority.' Quinn, however, maintains that 'if we had been asked if we had a contribution to make, that would have been welcomed but actually we weren't seen as having much influence.'² Throughout the H-Blocks crisis, the GAA was 'hugely influenced' by the diplomatic efforts of Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, who was in direct contact with both the Irish and British governments.³ Ó Fiaich, who had a very close relationship with the GAA at all levels,⁴ regularly met with McFlynn and Mulvihill and kept the GAA informed of his negotiations with the governments. Rather than have the GAA involved in negotiations with the two governments, the GAA were happy 'to allow [Ó Fiaich] set the lead in terms of contacts and what he was

¹ Hennessey, *Hunger Strike*, p. 460.

² Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

³ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

⁴ Roddy Hegarty, 'Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich and the GAA: an appreciation' in McAnallen, Hassan & Hegarty (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA*, pp. 232-239.

trying to do.”⁵ There is evidence, however, that the Irish government was interested in the GAA’s view on the hunger strikes. At a 28 July 1981 meeting, An Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald told Leonard Figg, the British ambassador in Ireland, that he considered the GAA’s 4 June directive ‘a good development’.⁶

The H-Blocks crisis coincided with the GAA’s determined diplomatic effort to have the British Army removed from Saint Oliver Plunkett Park, Crossmaglen. In May 1980 a sub-committee⁷ was established for this purpose, which held several meetings with representatives of the Irish⁸ and British⁹ governments. No similar meetings were held between the GAA and the NIO.¹⁰ The fact that the focus of these meetings was the occupation of the Crossmaglen GAA grounds, with the hunger strikes only raised on one occasion - at the 19 November 1980 meeting with Brian Lenihan - is reflective of the fact that the British military occupation of Saint Oliver Plunkett Park was a direct GAA issue, whereas the H-Blocks crisis, while affecting the GAA, did not directly relate to the association. The limited, but public, support the GAA gave to the protesting prisoners was not an issue for either government – neither government approached the GAA, at any level, and requested that association clubs and members refrain from publicly supporting the hunger strikes. Indeed, during the three year period 1979-1981, the annual grant from the Sports Council for Northern Ireland to the Ulster GAA increased substantially from IR£5,804 (1979) to IR£12,386 (1981).¹¹ The level of funding received by the Ulster GAA was a source of contention for some Ulster unionists, with the support the GAA gave to the hunger strikers, used by these politicians as justification for ending such funding.¹²

⁵ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

⁶ Note on the interview between An Taoiseach and the British Ambassador, 28 July 1981. DFA/2011/39/1884.

⁷ This sub-committee consisted of Con Murphy, Peter Harte, Donal Whelan, Aidan McGowan and Tomas Walsh.

⁸ The committee met with Brian Lenihan, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Gene Fitzgerald, Minister for Labour, on 20 June 1980, with another meeting held with Brian Lenihan on 19 November 1980. There were also some informal discussions at GAA matches between association officials and An Taoiseach Charles Haughey, but no such discussions took place with An Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald.

⁹ GAA delegates met a number of British Labour MP’s in the House of Commons, on 26 June 1980,⁹ while on 17 July 1980 a GAA delegation met with Michael Alison, Minister of State at the NIO with responsibility for prisons, in Westminster.

¹⁰ NIO/12/155A ‘Meetings between Ministers and NI MPs and Councillors on Prison Matters (1979-1986)’ & NIO/12/254 ‘Meetings in Connection with the Hunger Strike (1981)’.

¹¹ Ulster GAA Annual Reports, 1980-1982 inclusive.

¹² In 1984, during a debate as to whether Nicholas Scott, Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, considered the grant to the GAA as ‘money well spent and a good investment’, Peter Robinson asked Scott ‘Does the Minister recognise that the GAA has permitted, if not encouraged, the use of its property by the IRA and that, during the hunger strike, it sent messages of support to the hunger strikers?’ Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 26 April 1984, Volume 58, cc. 870-871.

When discussing the effects the H-Blocks crisis had on GAA's relationship with the Irish and British security forces, a number of factors must be considered. A clear distinction must be made between An Garda Síochána and the Garda Representative Association (GRA) - the GRA is the body that was established to agitate for its members in areas of pay and conditions of employment. The relationship between the GRA and An Garda Síochána has, at times, been fraught. The GAA's relationship with the British security forces (British Army and RUC) must be evaluated in the context of Rule 21 (formerly Rule 15) of the GAA, which banned members of British security forces from becoming members of the GAA. The existence of Rule 21, which was abolished in 2001, meant that, for all-intents and purposes, the GAA was an anti-British security forces organisation – an organisation does not ban people if they are in favour or hold a neutral view of them.

Patrick McFlynn, Liam Mulvihill and Peter Quinn all agree that an excellent relationship existed between the GAA and the Garda Commissioner, Patrick McLaughlin,¹³ and 'the vast majority of the people at assistant-commissioner and superintendent rank'¹⁴ throughout the H-Blocks crisis, and beyond. McFlynn held regular informal meetings with McLaughlin at Garda Headquarters where McLaughlin was 'very helpful in providing [McFlynn] with advice and had a special insight from holding regular meetings with the RUC Chief, John Hermon.'¹⁵ This cordial relationship also existed at Ulster Council level, perhaps even more so as McLaughlin was a former member of the Council. Despite this excellent relationship between both organisations, the perceived relationship, rather than the actual relationship, between the GAA and the Gardaí was seriously affected by events connected to the H-Blocks crisis. The media coverage of the two arguments between the GAA and the GRA gave the impression that the GAA and An Garda Síochána were at loggerheads with one another when, in actual fact, it was a very small minority within the GAA and the GRA who were taking issue with the GAA's attitude to republican violence. While the arguments between the GAA and the GRA had no real short or long term effects or consequences for the GAA's relationship with An Garda Síochána, Mulvihill maintains that the arguments 'showed that [the

¹³ Patrick McLaughlin was born in Malin Head in 1921. He joined the Gardaí in 1943 and rose steadily through its ranks becoming a superintendent in 1961 and an assistant commissioner in 1972. McLaughlin was appointed Commissioner in 1978 and resigned the position in 1983, as a result of a telephone bugging controversy. The *Irish Independent* noted that McLaughlin 'came from a staunch Donegal Fianna Fail background, and his career advancement at senior level was closely associated with the periods of Fianna Fail government in the Seventies.' *Irish Independent*, 19 December 2004.

¹⁴ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

¹⁵ MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles*, p. 16.

GAA was] very badly prepared for being involved in politics with a small p in terms of being able to protect ourselves.’¹⁶

Within Northern Ireland, the hunger strikes were accompanied by an upsurge in rioting and sustained confrontations between the republican community, which included GAA members, and the British security forces. On at least one occasion, at the seven day vigil outside Casement Park, the British security forces attacked a GAA H-Blocks demonstration. These confrontations hardened republican and (some) GAA attitudes against the British security forces. These hardened attitudes amongst the GAA Ulster (and other) county boards were clearly articulated in 1998 when the Ulster county boards rejected GAA president Joe McDonagh’s attempts to abolish Rule 21. When the Rule was abolished in 2001, there was still some Ulster resistance to its removal. While the H-Blocks crisis hardened some GAA attitudes, it is hard to quantify the effect(s) they had on the long term relationship between the GAA and the British security forces as the crisis was only one of a number of factors that shaped this relationship. The persistent harassment of GAA members, the unnecessary road blocks to and from Gaelic grounds, the 1988 murder of Aidan McAnespie and the continued occupation of Saint Oliver Plunkett Park are some of the factors that must also be considered when assessing the relationship.

The hunger strikes had the immediate effect of further polarising the nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist communities. Des Blatherwick, Northern Ireland Political Affairs Division, wrote in an August 1981 memo to the Northern Ireland Central Secretariat that the consequences of the hunger strikes will be ‘with us for a long time’ and that the relationships between the ‘communities, and between the minority and the Government’ had been adversely affected.¹⁷ This section will ask if the limited, but visible, support the GAA gave to the republican prisoners affected the relationship between the association and the loyalist and republican communities.

In 1984, the political historian Eamon Phoenix wrote that while many moderate unionists were prepared to see the GAA as a sporting and cultural organisation, the more hardline unionists saw the GAA as a body ‘shrouded in republicanism.’ These unionists, according to Phoenix, pointed to the ‘undoubted support of many GAA clubs for the H-Block hunger strike’ in their attempts to deny sporting grants and recreation facilities to the GAA.¹⁸

¹⁶ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

¹⁷ NIO/ Cent/1/10/66.

¹⁸ Eamon Phoenix, ‘G.A.A.’s Era of Turmoil in Northern Ireland’, *Fortnight*, No. 211, December 1984, pp. 8-9.

While a comprehensive list of all acts of alleged and real unionist political bias against the GAA, in addition to a list of all physical attacks upon GAA personnel and property, would be extremely worthwhile in compiling, in order to investigate if such acts increased as a result of GAA support for the hunger strikes, these lists do not exist and it is not feasible to produce such lists in the timeframe of this study. This section will instead use the information contained in the publication *Lost Lives*¹⁹ as the basis for a very limited investigation as to whether GAA support for the hunger strikes resulted in an increase in lethal loyalist attacks upon GAA personnel. The information contained within *Lost Lives* indicates that the number of lethal loyalist attacks on GAA members did not increase as a result of some GAA units publicly supporting the republican prisoners. Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the fifteen members²⁰ of the GAA killed by loyalist paramilitaries between 1969 and 1997 indicates that while GAA membership helped loyalist paramilitaries identify Catholic targets, it was not until the heightened sectarian period of the early 1990s that the GAA became a 'direct target' for militant loyalism.²¹ Summarily, the support given to the hunger strikers by the GAA had no real effect on the already-hostile relationship between the GAA and militant loyalism.

Physical and commemorative memorials to the hunger strikers can be found throughout the landscape of the GAA in Northern Ireland.²² In addition to the GAA commemorating the hunger strikes, several republican-organised hunger strike commemorations have taken place within GAA grounds. Whether these memorials and commemorations were intended as political statements or not, they provide a palpable link between some GAA clubs and the hunger strikes, and, to some people, the wider militant republican movement. When the 1981

¹⁹ David McKittrick et al, *Lost Lives, The stories of the men, women and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles*, (London: Mainstream Publishing, 2004).

²⁰ Frank Corr (26 July 1972), Francis H. McCaughey (8 November 1973), James Desmond Devlin (7 May 1974), Colm Gerard McCartney (24 August 1975), John P. Farmer (24 August 1975), Sean O'Hagan (15 May 1976), William Strathearn (19 April 1977), Peadar Fagan (17 November 1981), Jack Kielty (25 January 1988), Patrick Shields (3 January 1993), Sean Fox (25 October 1993), Eamon Fox (17 May 1994), Gary Convie (17 May 1994), Sean Brown (12 May 1997), James Gerard Devlin (5 December 1997).

²¹ In October 1991 the UFF declared that it considered GAA property, members and supporters as 'legitimate targets' although this threat was quickly moderated to GAA members and supporters 'with strong republican links'. In 1993 the UDA threatened to murder members of the 'pan-nationalist front' which consisted of the Irish government, the SDLP and the GAA. *Irish Independent*, 8 October 1991, 9 October 1991 & 13 January 1993.

²² In 1986 the annual Martin Hurson Memorial Cup was inaugurated in Tyrone. In 1998 St. Teresa's GAC (Belfast) named their pitch 'McDonnell / Doherty Park' in honour of club members Joe McDonnell and Kieran Doherty. In 2004 a short-lived GAA club was formed in Twinbrook (Belfast) called Cumann na Fúiseoige with its name and club crest closely associated with Bobby Sands, who grew up in the Twinbrook area.

hunger strike concluded, the GAA was neither thanked nor condemned by the National H-Block Committee, the republican prisoners nor Sinn Féin, all of whom released statements thanking the groups who supported the prisoners and condemning the British government and the 'Irish Establishment, consisting of the Catholic Church, the Dublin Government and the SDLP'. While there may have been some tension between the republican movement and the GAA in the immediate aftermath of the hunger strikes, this anger was very quickly channelled at the Irish and British governments, the SDLP and the Catholic Church.²³ Furthermore, the actions of the GAA at local levels were appreciated by the GAA. The republican movement, according to Jim Gibney, were thankful that individual members of the GAA had been involved in the H-Block campaign and that GAA grounds had been used for propaganda purposes. While there may have been a view, in the immediate aftermath of the hunger strikes, that 'the national leadership [of the GAA] could have done a bit more [for the prisoners]', with the passage of time many of those who had led the prison campaign and put pressure on the GAA to support the demands of the prisoners, came to realise, and somewhat appreciate, that the GAA had been placed in a particularly difficult situation.²⁴ Again, the hunger strikes left no lasting legacy on the relationship between the GAA and the republican community in Ireland.

The relationship between the GAA and the national media (Ireland and Northern Ireland) during the H-Blocks crisis can be best categorised as one of open antagonism, with one club calling for an association-wide boycott of the *Irish Independent* in January 1981. From the outset of the hunger strikes, and throughout their entire course, the main national newspapers in Ireland, apart from the *Irish News*, were predominantly negative in their coverage of the hunger strikers and their aims.²⁵ This was in contrast to the series of motions that were passed by the GAA that declared the association's support for the aims of the hunger strikers and those motions that were perceived as expressing support for militant republicanism. This, according to Mulvihill, led to the situation whereby the media 'were convinced that the GAA was republican, ultra-republican, probably that it supported the cause of violence in the North.'²⁶ In addition to these two opposite stances taken by the GAA and the Irish media, is

²³ Interview with Danny Morrison, Belfast, 22 October 2014.

²⁴ Interview with Jim Gibney, Belfast, 4 October 2014.

²⁵ Two studies that explore the role and attitude of the media during the hunger strikes are 1) Aogan Mulchay, 'Claims-Making and the Construction of Legitimacy: Press Coverage of the 1981 Northern Irish Hunger Strike' in *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, Volume 42, No. 4, 1995, pp. 449-467 and 2) Marissa Black, 'Starving for Attention: Legitimizing Northern Ireland's Prison Hunger Strike of 1981 through the Print Media', Thesis, Ohio State University, 2012.

²⁶ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

the fact that journalism strives for sensationalism in an attempt to sell newspapers. Furthermore, within Northern Ireland, there was a section of the media that was politically biased in its coverage of any activities that it perceived as nationalist, which included the GAA.

The hostile relationship between the GAA and the media cannot be blamed wholly on an anti-hunger strike media. Peter Quinn admitted that, while the GAA 'got bad coverage', the association 'were the architects of our own downfall' as the 'GAA didn't really take PR seriously or relations with the media seriously until much later than that.'²⁷ The GAA, at Central Council level, did not employ a full-time Public Relations Officer (PRO) until Patrick Quigley (Pádraig Ó Coigligh)²⁸ was appointed to the role in March 1977.²⁹ While Quigley quickly established an excellent relationship with the various sports editors and journalists, a corresponding relationship was not established with non-sporting editors or journalists.³⁰ At Ulster Council level, there was no dedicated PRO throughout the H-Blocks crisis, with the duties of the PRO being fulfilled by the council secretary, Michael Feeney. This meant that when the GAA, at all levels, got involved in the various forms of protests surrounding the H-Blocks crisis, the association was not readily able to explain or defend their actions. Liam Mulvihill considers the relationship between the GAA and the media as one of the association's 'greatest failures' during the crisis. Mulvihill feels that the GAA should have identified the need to develop contacts with non-sporting journalists and editors and should have been 'better at seeing how [the political and current affairs journalists and editors] perceived us.'³¹

Desmond Fahy, in *How the GAA Survived the Troubles*, credits the hunger strikes with giving the GAA a newfound sense of confidence and links this confidence to a 'ten-fold increase' in the coverage of Gaelic games by the Northern Irish media.³² While it is true that within a decade of the hunger strikes ending the two major television companies in Northern Ireland (BBC and UTV) were competing for the rights to show Gaelic games, the catalyst for the improved coverage of Gaelic games within Northern Ireland was the October 1982 publication of Feargal McCormack and Colm Fitzpatrick's analytical report which compared GAA coverage by the Northern Irish media to the coverage afforded to other sports within the

²⁷ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

²⁸ Pat Quigley was a news sub-editor of the *Irish Press* between 1961 and 1970; he subsequently worked on the magazine *This Week* before becoming the sports editor of the *Sunday World* – a position he kept until he became the GAA full-time PRO in 1977.

²⁹ *Irish Press*, 22 March 1977.

³⁰ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

³¹ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

³² Fahy, *How the GAA Survived the Troubles*, pp. 13-14.

province. This report concluded that the coverage of Gaelic games was outrageously bad and, according to Peter Quinn, ‘had the effect that Fergal and his committee intended – it changed attitudes within the media and the media started covering the GAA matches.’ It was the effects of this 1982 report, rather than the newfound confidence that accompanied the conclusion of the hunger strike, that changed the long-term relationship between the GAA and the media outlets in Northern Ireland. The hunger strikes, and McCormack and Fitzpatrick’s 1982 report, had no short term or long term impact on Unionist-orientated newspapers, the *Belfast Telegraph* in particular, which continued to ignore Gaelic games and portray the GAA in a negative manner.

II.

All of the available GAA oral and written sources that make reference to the hunger strikes agree that the hunger strikes were one of the most difficult challenges the GAA faced. Liam Mulvihill, writing in 1982, called the 1981 hunger strike ‘a long festering sore which left considerable marks on the Association during the year’; on at least three occasions Patrick McFlynn paraphrased Marcus De Búrca who wrote (in an unidentified article) that the three times the GAA looked likely to split were the Parnell controversy, the Civil War and the hunger strikes³³ while Desmond Fahy wrote that ‘after the hunger strikes the GAA could never be the same again.’ This section will analyse if the crisis had a long term effect on the relationship between the GAA in Northern Ireland and the GAA in the Republic of Ireland. This section will also question if the crisis influenced or changed the policies of the association, while at the same time asking if the crisis affected the association’s image of itself and its sense of purpose.

The H-Blocks crisis, and the hunger strikes in particular, was the first regional political crisis the GAA faced. The hunger strikes, more than anything that had happened before them, forcefully expressed to the GAA as a whole that GAA members in Northern Ireland were operating in circumstances completely different to those in the Republic of Ireland. However, even when these different set of circumstances were clearly highlighted, many GAA members in the Republic of Ireland either failed to recognise their significance or chose to ignore them and continued to insist that GAA members in Northern Ireland should simply disregard the political crisis that had consumed the province, in favour of the rulebook of the GAA. This led

³³ 1) Patrick McFlynn, ‘75 Years out of 125: A Lifetime in the GAA’ in McAnallen, Hassan & Hegarty (eds.), *The Evolution of the GAA*, pp. 11-19. 2) MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles*, pp. 18-19. 3) Interview with Patrick MacFlynn, 20 August 2009, GAA Oral History Project.

to some resentment within Ulster. Peter Quinn later wrote of ‘those from outside the province who thought that they knew what was happening at ground level and were prone to pontificating on the issues involved’.³⁴ This gulf in attitudes was not confined to the GAA and, in many ways, persists until today. Quinn feels that this is ‘more a border issue than a GAA issue’ insofar as ‘the 26 counties don’t understand northern nationalism’ and that northern nationalists are ‘kind of like the child in the family who is really seen as slightly different but still part of the family.’³⁵ Throughout the hunger strikes, this gulf in attitudes was somewhat overcome by the fact that the GAA president, Patrick McFlynn, was from Northern Ireland and was able to provide an ‘Ulster perspective’ to the largely southern-based Central Council. McFlynn, in his autobiography, wrote that his ‘northern background...provided [him] with a deeper understanding of the issues and people involved than might otherwise have been the case.’³⁶ This, however, also worked against McFlynn who came under serious pressure to adopt a more hard-line approach from some high-ranking GAA officials from Northern Ireland – Michael Feeney and Peter Harte in particular.³⁷

While the relationship between the Central Council and the Ulster Council was strained at times during the H-Blocks crisis, there were no short-term or long-term effects on this relationship. Liam Mulvihill called the relationship between the two governing bodies during this period as ‘ambivalent’ but insisted that a ‘very close working relationship’ was maintained throughout the crisis. Mulvihill, however, feels that the Ulster Council would have always had a different relationship to the Central Council, comparable to other provincial councils. The Ulster Council, according to Mulvihill, ‘always had a certain amount of autonomy’ as the Council had to deal with issues that did not affect the rest of the GAA. Mulvihill feels that while the Ulster Council had this autonomy, the Council knew the extent of this autonomy and there ‘was never a danger that they would go too far.’³⁸ This ‘Ulster autonomy’ was somewhat tested following the issuing of the 4 June 1981 directive. Peter Quinn explained that the Ulster Council ‘ignored’ the directive and that it was never an issue for the Council; the majority of Ulster county boards failed to pass the directive onto the clubs within their jurisdiction and, when the directive became public knowledge, it was either ignored by the majority of Ulster clubs or, in the case of the South Antrim clubs, openly challenged by them. The directive was,

³⁴ Quinn, *The Outsider*, p. 146.

³⁵ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

³⁶ MacFlynn, *Leading Through the Troubles*, p. 11.

³⁷ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

³⁸ Interview with Liam Mulvihill, Croke Park, 23 April 2014.

however, adhered to by the Down county board. As discussed in Chapter Three, the furore over the 4 June directive only lasted a matter of days and did not leave a lasting legacy on the relationship between the Central and Ulster Councils.

While the hunger strikes had no long-term effects on the relationship between the Central Council and the Ulster Council, the effect the hunger strikes had on the relationship between some Ulster clubs and their governing bodies (county board, provincial council and central council) was more pronounced. The hunger strikes affected some Ulster clubs on an almost daily basis, whereas throughout the two hunger strikes, the topic was only mentioned on seven occasions at the fourteen meetings held by the national leadership bodies – the Central Council (who met three times) and the Coiste Bainistí (who met eleven times). On five of these seven occasions the matter was only discussed in passing, i.e. replying to a letter from the Tyrone secretary. The H-Blocks were not a priority for the vast majority of the Coiste Bainistí members who were more concerned with the issues pertaining to the running of the GAA in their respective jurisdictions, with the responsibility for the hunger strikes largely left to Mulvihill and McFlynn. This disconnect, according to Peter Quinn, left a lasting legacy whereby in some republican areas within Northern Ireland ‘the club is the focus, the county board is semi-important, the Ulster Council is even less important and what happens in Croke Park is irrelevant.’³⁹

During the period of the hunger strikes, some clubs withdrew from competitions in support of the hunger strikers, and in protest at the GAA’s response to the hunger strike, but this was a very short-term measure. While there is written⁴⁰ and anecdotal evidence that clubs in all of the six Northern Ireland counties withdrew from competitions during the hunger strike, a thorough research of the GAA fixture lists and results in the local newspapers⁴¹ indicates that only two clubs (Derrytresk (Tyrone) and Slaughneil (Derry)) withdrew fully from their respective competitions. It must be noted that all county leagues and championships within Ulster were completed in both 1980 and 1981, albeit with some delays to the schedules and the loss of the aforementioned clubs. The clubs that did withdraw from their respective competitions took what Quinn calls ‘the least worst option’ insofar as these clubs did not deregister or leave the association, but instead they merely temporarily curtailed their

³⁹ Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

⁴⁰ Quinn, *The Outsider*, p. 148.

⁴¹ *Fermanagh Herald*, *Ulster Herald*, *Derry Journal*, *Down Journal*, *Andersonstown News*.

participation in their respective competitions.⁴² When the hunger strike ended these clubs resumed their participation.

While the change to Rule 7, in 1979, was to have major implications for the GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks crisis, it must be remembered, as discussed in Chapter Two, that the main motivation behind this change was the British Army's occupation of GAA grounds. Despite the subsequent vocal protestations of Tom Woufle, John O'Grady and Sean Kilfeather, the H-Blocks crisis did not force the GAA to change their written policy or rulebook – Rule 7 did not revert back to its original 'non-political' form. The crisis did, however, affect the association's image of itself and its sense of purpose. In the build-up to the crisis, between 1972 and 1979, the GAA, on numerous occasions passed a series motions that were rhetorically republican, and sometimes openly-militaristic, in support of 'the struggle for national liberation.' The passing of these motions, at the highest governing level of the GAA, was particularly troublesome for the association during the two high-profile arguments with representatives of the GRA. In the decade following the conclusion of the hunger strikes, no such motions of a republican / militaristic nature appeared on the Annual Congress. Motions continued to be passed condemning the ongoing British military occupation of Saint Oliver Plunkett Park in Crossmaglen and on four occasions motions were discussed regarding specific conditions within Northern Irish prisons⁴³ but no further stand-alone motions calling for the removal of British troops from Ireland and / or support for the 'national struggle' appeared on the agenda.

As can be seen from the above two sections, the H-Blocks crisis did not leave a lasting legacy on the GAA's external relationships, nor did the crisis change the GAA itself. This does not dismiss the severity of the crisis for the GAA - it merely confirms that the challenges posed to the GAA were in the short-term. Furthermore, one could argue that it is a testament to the GAA officials - Peter Harte, Patrick McFlynn and Liam Mulvihill in particular - that the challenges the GAA faced during this period were overcome with no long-term consequences for the association. As discussed in earlier chapters, the H-Blocks campaign briefly facilitated the coming together of the nationalist community but this unity quickly disappeared; similar to the H-Block campaign, the GAA's membership consisted of the various strands of nationalism

⁴² Interview with Peter Quinn, Enniskillen, 21 June 2014.

⁴³ In 1985 and 1987 separate motions were passed protesting against the ban on Gaelic games in Long Kesh (1985) and the wider ban on the Irish language, literature and Gaelic games within Northern Irish prisons (1987). In 1986 and 1987 a motion was discussed, withdrawn (1986) and subsequently passed (1987) condemning the practice of strip-searching in prisons.

and the association could have very easily fragmented and split over the H-Blocks issue. The GAA's involvement in the H-Blocks campaign saw the association face a number of crises of its own, including the two public rows with the GRA and the fallout from the 4 June 1981 directive, but the GAA remained a united association.

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