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Mr. Nelson

PSS

PSM

I attach on file opposite a number of letters drafted and issued in the Taoiseach's Department in reply to correspondence from the families of prisoners in Long Kesh.

I fear that the use of this draft projects an unfortunate image of the Taoiseach's position on Long Kesh and does not adequately show the concern of the Government at the situation in the prison and in particular at the distress of the prisoners' families.

Clearly much of the correspondence received about Long Kesh comes from Provisional sympathisers, including prisoners' relatives who approve of the Provisionals campaign of violence. Equally clearly, however, some correspondents are motivated ^{mainly} ~~only~~ by concern for the welfare of their relatives in prison, and in the case of some of these, the prisoners' families seem genuinely at a loss in the dilemma in which they find themselves.

Where there is a presumption of goodwill on the part of the correspondents, I would suggest that it is desirable that the replies sent should aim to convey a feeling of the sympathy of the Government for the Republican families caught in a difficult position. Such an approach may serve to prevent the alienation of such correspondents from the Government here and from legitimate political parties in the North. In addition it should be possible, as I have attempted to do in the draft I have prepared, to distinguish between the question of political status and the problem of the welfare of prisoners, on which the Government would no doubt welcome the possibility of making representations to the British.

The draft I have put on file opposite is intended principally as a pro forma reply which could be recommended to the Taoiseach's Office, through the Department of the Taoiseach, for use in appropriate cases. Naturally, even if something along the lines of my draft is approved, we can do no more than make a recommendation, and I am conscious of the delicacy of doing even that, in terms of interdepartmental relations, but I consider that the unfortunate impact the current form of reply is likely to have justifies the attempt.

Hugh Swift

Hugh Swift
November, 1978

13 December

Mr. Neligan,

I agree entirely with Mr. Swift that the present standard letter on Long Kesh should be revised and that this should be done on the lines set out in Mr. Swift's minute.

As regards the actual draft I would be nervous of going into detail on the circumstances in the prison, where we are obliged to choose between conflicting accounts, few or none of which are disinterested. It might ~~therefore~~ be preferable not to risk becoming involved in arguments on details of the prison régime. Also, since the attitudes of the relatives are inspired by understandable emotional and psychological pressures a very detailed and reasoned account of considerations behind Government policy may provoke further remonstrance rather than acceptance. I have therefore attempted a draft (across) which follows Mr. Swift's approach but in more general terms and which you may wish to consider.

Seán Ó hUiginn

3.1.79.

Mr. Swift.

Any further obs. pl.?

4/1/79

Mr. Neligan

Mr. O hUiginn

To me in reply to outstanding letter to minute pl. 5/1/79

I agree that this meets the needs of our correspondence. If, as I understand, we have current correspondence, advantage might be taken to clear the draft with the PSW and we could then transmit to Dept. Taoiseach for information as our ~~and~~ pro forma reply

HS 4/1/79

DRAFT

Dear

I have been asked by the Taoiseach, Mr. J. Lynch T.D., to thank you for your letter of November 1978, concerning Long Kesh prison.

The situation in Long Kesh is a cause of great concern to the Taoiseach and the Government. The Taoiseach is aware of the anguish which the reports of the situation in the prison causes to the families of the prisoners and he is most anxious that a normal situation should return to the prison as quickly as possible. However, attempts by the Provisional IRA and other groups to manipulate the plight of the prisoners and their families for propaganda purposes greatly complicates the task of achieving a solution.

The prisoners involved in the protest at Long Kesh have been found guilty by the courts of a variety of criminal acts. The Taoiseach can in no way condone the commission of criminal acts, whatever the motivation attributed by those responsible. He cannot therefore support the demand for special political status for those found guilty of criminal acts and he considers that the interests of the prisoners and of their families would be best served if prisoners were not encouraged to continue their self destructive protest.

The Taoiseach uses all the sources available to him to keep the situation in Long Kesh under the closest possible review. He is aware of the sordid and distressing conditions under which the protesting prisoners are now detained. However, he must also

● point out that much of their unpleasant circumstances are caused by the protesting prisoners themselves. The improvement in the sanitary arrangements in the cells and indeed in the furnishing arrangements is directly in the prisoners own hands and there is little that anyone outside the prison can do to help them so long as they continue to protest by fouling their cells.

The Taoiseach has noted the description you have given of the conditions of prisoners and of the treatment they receive and he has also noted other similar reports he has received from a variety of public and private sources. However, he has been informed by the British Government that many of the allegations are untrue, in particular that the prisoners are denied the standard exercise period or are in general treated other than in accordance with the prison rules. (You will probably be aware that the Northern Ireland prison rules were recently amended to remove the provision for the use of punishment diets).

The Taoiseach is not in a position to determine whether or not individual allegations of ill-treatment or of non-conformity with the prison rules are well-founded or not. In order that he might have any individual case pursued and, if appropriate, representations made to the British authorities, the Taoiseach would need to have a full statement of the facts in that case, including as appropriate a statement from the prisoner in question.

The Taoiseach regrets that it is not possible for him to send you a more positive reply to your letter. However he hopes that this frank statement of his views will be of assistance to you.

The Taoiseach understands your statement that your son was only a child when the troubles started and that he and others would not in other circumstances have broken the law. This is part of the tragedy of political violence in Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach hopes that the cessation of violence and the substitution of the political process will help to heal the tragedy in families such

● as yours and avoid it in other cases. He would be grateful for your assistance in doing everything possible to end the cycle of violence in Ireland.

Yours sincerely

Private Secretary