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*Dear Mr. Canavan,*

I am replying on Mr Alison's behalf to your letter of 27 November to the Secretary of State. The Minister has studied with interest the comments and suggestions which followed from your visit to Mr Eugene McCormick at Maze on 17 November, and he has asked me to make the following points in reply.

You express concern about the likely effect on the protesting prisoners of the disciplinary measures which are being taken against them, in particular the alleged deprivation of daily mental and physical recreation and the loss of association. The protesting prisoners know that they can exercise in prison uniform, etc in accordance with Prison Rules, but they refuse to do so. It is because we believe in the value of exercise that we have provided a large, well-equipped sports hall for use by the occupants of the cell blocks; this is available for use by the prisoners who conform with the Rules. Similarly we have provided industrial and vocational training of a high standard.

As to reading material, we have provided libraries in the central part of the Blocks. However, the protesters always refused to visit these and we then put a selection of books and magazines inside the room in each wing where the prisoners change for visits, attending Mass and the like. No clothing is required for use of these facilities and the prisoners merely have to pick up the book or magazine - however they will not do so. It is therefore entirely of the prisoners' own choosing that they have nothing to read. I am sure you appreciate that



they do this for the propaganda purpose of claiming that we are preventing them from obtaining reading material.

You are also concerned about the apparent isolation of the prisoners in the Blocks. To the extent that they are apparently more isolated than other prisoners, this is of their choosing in refusing to conform to the Rules accepted by other prisoners. However, they are housed two to a cell, and communication within wings is not difficult. Furthermore, the prisoners are seen weekly by the medical officer and take monthly visits with their relatives. A number also take legal visits. Finally the steam-cleaning of cells means that all dirty protesters are moved to another wing at intervals of a week to a fortnight and this provides further opportunity for contact.

Were there to be deprivation on the scale claimed by the protesters, one would expect there to be significant medical evidence of this. However, we have had no evidence of any mental or physical illness brought on by the protest, nor has the appearance and attitude of those released given any suggestion of it.

In the matter of punishments one must be careful to separate that which is a punishment from that which is a self-imposed deprivation. The propagandists for the protest regularly seek to confuse the latter with the former and I have already mentioned some of the more obvious cases. The behaviour of the protesters - with their destruction of cells and contents, their uniquely filthy 'protest', their regular refusal to co-operate with staff and periodic open hostility - is of a kind and on a scale unprecedented in our prisons. However, no 'special' punishments have been invoked - those given are within what is provided for in Prison Rules and in the context are not, we believe, excessive. The majority of prisoners obey the Prison Rules and know that if they break them punishment will ensue in accordance with the Rules. It would be most unfair to mitigate punishments for one group of prisoners simply because they have pursued their breach of Rules for a longer period and with greater determination.



The possibility of our making the first move to end the protest impasse has been suggested by a number of people and groups with a humanitarian concern for events. They too have suggested that we might allow prisoners to wear tracksuits or their own clothing. We entirely accept that all these proposals are made from the sincerest of motives, but I am afraid that they indicate a misunderstanding of the nature of the protest. We have a situation in which the terrorist organisation sponsoring the dirty protest is seeking, by various means, to achieve their own ends. Their campaign has a number of facets, which are collectively aimed to bring about their goal; thus we have killing, bombing, propaganda and the prison protest supported by successive murders of prison officers. The spokesmen of the Provisionals have said openly that to "win the war", as they put it, they must first win on the question of 'status'.

The protest is not really about clothing, exercise or work. Concessions in these areas would be interpreted as the first step towards the granting of special status, whatever this might be called. Any form of special treatment would imply that an amnesty would be granted to the prisoners concerned once the campaign had ended. This would be a direct encouragement to the paramilitaries to continue with their campaign of violence and to seek to recruit new members, particularly among the young.

As for the likely reaction of the prisoners to any change in their circumstances which falls short of their demands, might I refer to the events of 30 November? On that morning the prison Governor issued chairs to the protesters - one for each prisoner - in an effort to improve their material surroundings. Late in the evening the prisoners acted in concert to destroy most of the chairs. Furthermore, they used the pieces as weapons to destroy firstly the metal grilles and then the translucent window coverings. Contrary to propaganda reports, order was restored without incident and only one protester required treatment for a foot wound caused by standing on the smashed window covering.



I think these actions speak louder than words in exemplifying what would also be the protesters' attitude to any concessions which fall short of capitulation by the Government.

To conclude, what I am saying is that so far as the ending of the protest is concerned it is for the prisoners, and those who direct or influence them from outside, to decide when to put an end to the campaign. We maintain that it would be a gross abdication for us as the Government to accept that those who commit criminal offences of the gravest kind in the course of a campaign of killing, maiming and terror intended to break the very authority of the state should receive any special form of treatment, recognition or concessions in our prisons after having been arrested, convicted and sentenced under the due processes of the law.

You also mentioned the searching of prisoners and the lighting. As for the close body search, we recognise that it is unpleasant for both prisoners and staff, but it is made necessary by the determination with which protesting prisoners have used smuggled materials to further their damage and disruption. A considerable number of potentially dangerous items have been discovered through these searches - including searches on wing transfers - and we have no doubt that smuggling on a considerable scale and including highly dangerous articles, has been averted only through these searches. The close body search is not normally carried out before or after prisoners go to mass.

I am puzzled by the claim made to you that the lighting in the cells of the protesting prisoners is faulty. Good lighting is essential both for the prisoners and in the interests of security. Any faults are reported at once and dealt with promptly by trade staff. There have been frequent attempts by the protesters to interfere with the lighting, and recently all lights were checked and further protected against interference by the prisoners.

The Minister hopes that what is said in this letter will assure you that we have given careful consideration to your suggestions and those



of other interested individuals and groups. If you would like to discuss any points arising which still concern you, Mr Alison would be willing to meet a smallish group of SDLP elected representatives including yourself. If you wish to take up the invitation, perhaps you would be good enough to contact me so that a convenient date can be arranged.

The delay in replying to your letter is regretted.

*Yours sincerely,  
Brooker*

DAVID BROOKER  
Private Secretary to  
Mr Alison