



Northern Ireland Office
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Gerry Fitt Esq MP
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29th
January 1980

Dear Gerry,

You telephoned my office last week and asked if we could provide you with some material which you might be able to use in your reply to letters sent to you, mainly from the United States, about the protest campaign in three of the cell-blocks at Maze Prison.

... I attach four paragraphs which I hope you will find helpful in replying to this kind of correspondence. I should be glad, at any time, to let you have some more detailed background if you would find this of any value.

Yours ever

William P. ...

Hidden copies:
PS/SOS (B)
PS/Mr Alison (B)
PS/PUS (B)
Mr Hannigan
Mr Barry
Mr Gilliland
Mr Buxton
Mr Jackson

JC

You refer in your letter to "Irish heroes on the blanket in Long Kesh". I find this a curious description, not in any way justified by the facts. What we have are some 350 prisoners who have been convicted through the criminal courts of some of the most serious offences; who before being sentenced had available all the normal safeguards including the laws of evidence, access to legal representation and right of appeal - without leave - to a higher court; and who themselves have created conditions of squalor in order to draw attention to their claim to be treated differently from other sentenced prisoners.

Much is said and written about "political prisoners". Nobody feels more strongly than I do about the right to freedom of political expression, but the men taking part in this protest are not imprisoned for their beliefs. Of the prisoners taking part in the protest at the end of last year 55 had been convicted of murder, 38 of attempted murder, 84 of firearms offences and 100 of explosives offences. These figures are bad enough, but they do not adequately depict the desperate trail of grief and anguish which many of these crimes have left behind. One more murder or maiming is just one more on the total, but to the family concerned it is the sad and irretrievable loss of, or injury to, a loved one.

Among these so-called "heroes" - it is nothing less than an affront to use this word - are men who, for example :-

- (i) bombed a shop in which a young woman was burned to death;
- (ii) murdered a soldier and a civilian searcher under cover of a University "Rag Day" parade; and
- (iii) placed bombs on a suburban train in which a woman of 22 was killed and several other innocent passengers injured;
- (iv) shot a man on an errand of mercy taking hardboard to repair houses in the Lower Falls area of Belfast which had been damaged by a bomb blast.

I can not accept for one moment that these men, who make up less than one-third of the total number of sentenced prisoners accommodated in the cell-blocks at Maze Prison, have any claim whatsoever to be treated differently from other persons sentenced to imprisonment through the courts. I would like to think that despite the arguments of those who support the protest campaign - which itself is causing so much anxiety among prisoners' relatives and friends - you will reflect on what I have said before you continue to give your own support to this misnamed "cause".