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The Most Reverend Edward Daly
Bishop of Derry
Bishop's House
St Eugene's Cathedral
LONDONDERRY
Co Londonderry

31 January 1980

Dear Bishop,

Thank you for your letter of 5 January about the protest campaign at Maze Prison against the refusal of special category status.

I was heartened to note your belief that support for the IRA is at its lowest ever ebb in the Catholic community. Certainly the Government wishes to do nothing which might rekindle support for the paramilitary organisations, and we are well aware that the IRA's main propaganda effort is being centred on the difficult and unpleasant situation in the three cell-blocks in which the protest is being carried out. They have made no secret of their view that to win the war, as they put it, they must first win on the question of "status".

It goes without saying that we should like to see an end to the protest. We have in Northern Ireland a humane prison regime which provides first-class facilities for work, training and education, and arrangements for visits and recreation which are in advance of those in Great Britain. I am sure you will have noted that the independent inquiry into the United Kingdom Prison Service under the Chairmanship of Mr Justice May described the prison accommodation in Northern Ireland as the best in the United Kingdom. It is in those conditions that this uniquely offensive form of protest is taking place.

You suggest that something should be done to break the deadlock, perhaps by allowing all prisoners in Northern Ireland to wear their own clothes. I do not think that the prison uniform, which is accepted by the great majority of sentenced prisoners, can on any reasonable view



be regarded as humiliating or degrading. It is not always realised that prisoners in Northern Ireland who conform with Prison Rules are allowed to wear their own clothes during association periods, so in effect uniform is only required to be worn during the working part of the day. Prison uniform is a feature of prison regimes throughout the United Kingdom, and if a change were to be made in the present arrangements for male prisoners it would have to be on a UK basis and for considered policy reasons; not as a concession in response to a terrorist campaign of murder, bombing and other violence.

We are constantly reviewing the arrangements for handling the protest, and I would like to remind you of the steps which we have already taken to contain the consequences of the prisoners' actions. The cells are being cleaned every few days; each dirty cell is repainted after every fourth cleaning; we have reviewed and improved the medical regime and taken various public health measures; we have replaced the window-coverings each time the prisoners have broken them; and we have put books and newspapers in each wing of the blocks concerned, which the prisoners could easily use if they chose to do so.

The attitude of the prisoners to attempts by the authorities to improve their self-imposed conditions is illustrated by the events of 30 November. On that morning the Prison Governor issued chairs to the protesters, one to each prisoner. Late in the evening the prisoners acted in concert to destroy nearly all the chairs. Then they used the pieces as weapons to destroy first the inner metal window grilles and then the outer translucent perspex shields. Subsequently attempts were made to claim that prisoners had been beaten up whilst the wreckage was being removed, when in fact only one injury of any significance occurred, and that through a prisoner standing on a piece of the broken perspex.

I recognise that your proposal that prisoners should no longer be required to wear uniform is made with the sincerest of motives; the same suggestion has already been put to us by a number of other people. But



I am afraid that suggestions of this kind do not go to the heart of the matter; the dirty protest is not really about the wearing of uniform, or prison work. The aim of the protesting prisoners and those who support them from outside is to force the Government into granting concessions which, in stages or all at once, would amount to the re-establishment of special category status. Once this had been attained, the next drive would no doubt be for an amnesty or promise of amnesty. Such a chain of events would allow the terrorist organisations not only to control those of their members who were imprisoned, but also to offer a kind of indemnity for the commission of further violent crimes. The lives of many more young people would then be perverted through their being caught up in the webs of the terrorist organisations.

I do understand the community pressures which the Maze protest has generated. It must be very difficult for the families and friends of the protesting prisoners to sift fact from fiction when they are consistently confronted by lurid and false allegations from the propagandists. I must be frank, however, and say that I see no easy solution to all the community aspects of the problem. The responsibility of the Government and the prison authorities is to maintain the rules of the prison, sustain hygiene and care for the prisoners as humanely as possible, and I am satisfied that this is being done by the Governor and his staff faithfully and unremittingly despite the unique provocations and successive murders of prison officers.

It must be for the prisoners themselves, and those who direct and influence them, to decide when to put an end to this bizarre attempt to blackmail the Government. You are well aware of the nature of the kinds of crimes which many of the prisoners have committed, and the trail of grief and suffering left behind. The Government is not prepared to abdicate its responsibility by giving special treatment or



concessions to such persons serving their sentences in prison.

I am, of course, most ready to discuss all these matters with you, if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Humphrey Atkins

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