



SECRETARY OF STATE  
FOR  
NORTHERN IRELAND

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17 November 1980

*Dear Bishop,*

You wrote to me on 13 October expressing your concern about the prospect of a hunger strike by some of the prisoners at Maze Prison in support of the campaign for the restoration of special category status.

I recognise that you have always taken a helpful and constructive approach to the difficult issues which are involved here, and I was glad to note your acceptance that there can be no compromise by the authorities on the principle of granting special treatment to a particular group of convicted prisoners because of the alleged motives for their crimes. Events have moved on considerably since you wrote to me; there was the announcement on behalf of the prisoners of their intention to commence a hunger strike on 27 October, my statement of 23 October in which I went to great pains to make the Government's position clear, and then the start of the hunger strike.

I was particularly interested in your suggestion that a solution might be found by the introduction of changes (which in the nature of things would have to apply to all sentenced prisoners) made for reasons of good penal policy. It was on this basis that we decided to replace the existing prison uniform with an issue of civilian-type clothing, but as you know this did not stop the prisoners from going on with their hunger strike. I am not sure what other changes you have in mind; sentenced prisoners who conform with Prison Rules are already allowed to wear their own clothes during the evenings and at week-ends. I expect you will agree with me, for instance, that there would be serious objections to allowing prisoners the freedom to choose their own form of occupation during the normal working day.

/Apart from

Apart from the change in regard to prison uniform, I have introduced a range of other humanitarian measures during the year. These include sports wear for exercise, extra letters and visits, consideration for compassionate home leave in appropriate circumstances and an alternative arrangement to avoid the close body searches about which there used to be many complaints. You know the reaction of the protesting prisoners to the improvements offered.

The prospects that some of the prisoners may starve themselves to death in support of their claim to political status is indeed a grim one. We in Government are naturally concerned about the dangers of increased tensions in the community, particularly at a time when many people have been encouraged by the slow but continued progress towards normality in the Province. But having said that, I cannot accept that our policy on the treatment of persons convicted and sentenced through the courts should be determined by a form of calculated blackmail.

Many well-intentioned groups and individuals urge, with complete sincerity, that a way should be found of terminating the protest action - and the hunger strike - without compromise on the central issue of political status. This implies a reasonable approach both by the authorities and those who are protesting. It seems clear, however, that the prisoners are not concerned with improving prison conditions, but only with securing a special status for those who claim a political motive for their crimes. The arguments for treating prisoners specially because of the alleged motives has been rejected in clear terms by the European Commission of Human Rights.

I very much hope that the protesting prisoners, and those who are in a position to influence them, will accept that there can be no yielding on this matter of principle, and that it will be of no possible help to anyone, or to any cause, for the hunger strike to continue.

In conclusion I should like to thank you again for your good wishes to me in regard to the many difficult problems now facing Northern Ireland and its people. May I, in return, say how much I welcome the efforts of those like yourself who are working so hard to try to promote peace and understanding.

Yours sincerely

Humphrey Allister