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Mr Dwyer *Miss McGowan* *23/3*
Last para is interesting. Mr Tompkins
ARR 23/3 *SCJ*
20.3.81

His Eminence Cardinal Tomas O Fiaich
Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of
All Ireland
Ara Coeli
ARMAGH

18⁰⁰ March 1981

Dear Cardinal O Fiaich,

Thank you for your letter of 28 February in which you record some of the points which you made during our meeting on 18 February and register your concern at the possible consequences of a second hunger strike.

As regards your four points, I commented at our meeting that:-

- (a) the kind of meeting that you had in mind might actually serve to strengthen the hands of the "leaders" within the prison rather than weaken them.
- (b) The prison authorities and the Government do not in fact require that a prisoner be deprived of all privileges for breaches of prison rules. When, following the authorities' initiative, 96 prisoners accepted clean cells and furniture in January, the scale of punishment was reduced, with the rate of loss of remission halved, and the addition of an extra parcel per month. This reduction was notified to all protesting prisoners in writing on 21 January, so the general point you are making is not only accepted, but the authorities have given practical, and public, expression to it.

20 MAR 1981



This scale is currently being applied to all those prisoners who have stopped fouling their cells.

So far as leisure clothing is concerned, I am afraid it is simply not the position that the prison authorities refused to allow the protestors to wear their own clothes because the latter refused to wear prison issue civilian garb in working hours. As I said in my statement of 23 January, the 20 prisoners in question refused inter alia to take part in work other than that of cleaning their own cells and receiving full-time education. In other words, this group sought to bring about a situation in which they, not the prison authorities, determined what they should and should not do; and their determination was to the effect that they be relieved of all the communal chores of running a prison which would therefore have to continue to be spread among the balance of the population while at the same time they enjoyed the privilege of wearing their own clothes.

- (c) While, obviously, I would pay close attention to what people of goodwill had to say about the circumstances in which a hunger strike might be averted, and the protest ended, I had to pay attention also to what the protestors themselves said or, apparently, allowed to be attributed to them. They had made it only too clear what kind of status, and what kind of prison regime they wanted: neither were matters which the Government could concede.
- (d) There was no difference of substance between the two statements you referred to. The point was simply that on 19 December stocks of civilian-type clothing were not yet



available and that prisoners ending their protest then would have to be issued with the old-style prison uniform. The undertaking was to provide the new-style civilian clothing as quickly as possible and, as you know, that undertaking was fully honoured.

As regards your final paragraph, I wholeheartedly share your concern for the innocent in the community. I am bound to say, however, that I do not think you do justice to the efforts that the Government has made over the past year towards easing the situation in the Maze and Armagh Prisons. This second hunger strike has been entered into explicitly in pursuit of an objective - political status - which commands no support from any responsible quarter that I know of, and which the prisoners themselves must surely realise the Government cannot concede. It is my belief that the great majority of the community who behaved with such restraint and good sense last autumn - not least because of the example set by so many Church and political figures inside and outside Northern Ireland - understand the position very clearly and where the responsibility for it really rests. It is my belief also that that same majority expect the Government to maintain its stance not to yield sound principles in the face of violence, whatever form that violence may take. The Government will maintain it and I am sure it can count on your support in so doing.

Yours sincerely

Samuel Whitby