



FROM: J M STEELE
PRISON DEPARTMENT
10 December 1990

Handwritten: JMS/SC
Useful stuff to
keep handy.

cc PS/Paymaster General (L)
Mr Wood (L&B)
Mr Maccabe
Mr Treharne

Handwritten: Mr Smith
G7 1/2

PS/PAYMASTER GENERAL (B)
PRISONS: MAZE DOCUMENTARY

1. Mr Neil Hamilton, MP, has asked for a reply to a letter from a constituent which expresses serious reservations about the recent documentary on Maze. The points raised are mainly concerned with what he describes as the "holiday camp" atmosphere and the Home Leave Schemes.
2. The letter is a not unnatural reaction by someone who did not like what he saw but fails to appreciate the consequences if we sought confrontation within Maze, the evidence of which was clearly seen in the library footage used by the programme makers.
3. The tenor of the letter is such that I feel it deserves a firm response and I attach a draft for consideration by the Paymaster General.

J M STEELE

EPC/6316

Handwritten: 125

DRAFT LETTER FOR SIGNATURE BY LORD BELSTEAD

~~Mr~~ Neil Hamilton *Ray MP.*
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

You wrote to my predecessor, John Cope, on 27 November enclosing a letter from a constituent, SAC G Hewitt, who expressed serious reservations about the recent BBC documentary on Maze.

Could I first deal with his impression that life in Maze is like a "holiday camp". Long term, high security prisoners in the United Kingdom generally enjoy a relaxed regime within a secure perimeter. Your constituent must have noticed that only rarely did prisoners leave the wing. The vast majority of their out-of-cell time is spent in a wing 25 yards long and in an adjoining exercise yard about one quarter the size of a football pitch - a more restricted life than most long term prisoners enjoy. They do not work because the authorities have decided they should not work on security grounds.

All prisoners in Northern Ireland, those convicted of terrorist offences and what might be termed ordinary criminals, wear their own clothes. We feel there is no sacrifice of principle in this nor has it had any significant affect on security.

Your constituent seemed particularly concerned about the Home Leave Schemes. While these are obviously of benefit to prisoners and their families they have also had the affect of reducing tension within Maze which is for the good of both staff and management. In addition they have had a sobering affect on some prisoners who might have convinced themselves that their campaign was succeeding and were then faced with the stark reality that, since they had been in prison, conditions in the Province have improved immeasurably.

I can well understand the feelings which your constituent expresses. I would ask him however to consider how he would wish the Maze to be run. He will have seen in the documentary library footage of the dark days of the dirty protests and hunger strikes. Does he really want a return to that situation? The Province would lose and the paramilitaries would gain. Fifty eight people, including members of the Security Forces, died on the streets in violence organised in connection with the hunger strikes. In addition, the related street disturbances were good recruiting grounds for the paramilitaries. The decision by Government at that time to resist demands made under pressure was undoubtedly the right one. However, where the prison authorities are satisfied that reasonable regime improvements can be made at the appropriate time and without detriment to the security of the prison or the safety of staff, is that not preferable to presenting the prisoners and their vociferous outside supporters with issues which they can exploit to the detriment of the Province as a whole?

It is the prison authorities who run Maze. As was clear from the film prisoners are very well aware of the ability of the Governor to impose his authority at any time. Paramilitary structures are not recognised although it would be foolish to pretend that they do not exist. The management of the prison engage in dialogue with all prisoners including those who describe themselves as "spokesmen". But it is the authorities who decide what shall and what shall not be permitted. All prisons run to an extent with the consent of prisoners.

I feel that the documentary illustrated clearly the challenges we face in achieving the right balance between security and humanity. I do not believe it was an apologia for terrorists and terrorism. Rather I think it portrayed the sterility of their thinking and the futility of violence.

I hope you will find this helpful in explaining matters to your constituent.

EPC/6316