



WB
cc NIO

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

27 August 1981

My dear Archbishop,

Thank you for your letter of 19 August about the hunger strike at the Maze Prison. Canon Baker did indeed pass on the substance of the message it contained to NIO officials and it has been looked at carefully. But I am grateful to you for taking the trouble to write yourself. I share all your concern to see an end to action by the prisoners which has cost ten lives in the prison and more lives and more pain outside it.

The Government has maintained steadily that the Northern Ireland prison regime is already a good one but that it is nevertheless committed to maintaining and improving it as resources, and as the needs of security, allow. It has indicated clearly the areas in which we see scope for such improvement, but we have, as you say, insisted that we cannot go ahead under duress.

There is good reason for this. The fact is that there is a wide gulf separating the kind of thing we can contemplate, in the pursuit of an enlightened regime, and the five demands of the prisoners which are designed fundamentally to change that regime. In other words there is no "agreed package of reforms". In these circumstances the danger of acting now is that not only would this not give the prisoners all they want but it would actually encourage them to carry on with the hunger strike in the hope that it would secure the balance.

It has been put to us that the prisoners need "guarantees" and it is presumably in that context that the independent Monitoring Committee has been suggested. We do not accept that lack of trust on the part of the prisoners is justified on the facts but we do

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acknowledge that it exists. It is partly for that reason that we have, throughout the successive hunger strikes, put our position on the record for all, including the prisoners, to see. For that reason also we have taken much trouble to explain to responsible people and bodies what our position is and to facilitate their access, if they want it, to the prison and to the prisoners.

All that being so, there is simply no need for another independent body to safeguard what the prisoners see as their interests. But there are other difficulties about the proposal on some of which you have, if I may say so, put your finger very precisely. In particular, as I have said, there is no agreed package of reforms: the real situation is as I have described it. Further, as I think you will understand, the Government really cannot allow itself to be drawn into negotiation with the Provisional IRA about who is acceptable and who is not, nor can it make the discharge of its responsibilities for the prisons in some way answerable to an independent body with no direct responsibility of its own.

I am sorry that my reply has to be a negative one. I do assure you that there is no question of raising difficulties for their own sake. The Government wants to see the hunger strike ended for the sake of all in the Northern Ireland community and it has played its part towards this end. But as things are, the first step now must be with the prisoners.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury