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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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23 January 1981

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London
SW1

Prime Minister.

Dear Michael,

The prisoners have been told that the demands at 5, 6 + 7 below are not acceptable. They have accepted this calmly. They have asked for and been given a wash a shave and a haircut (which one, of course, might not [privileges]). No further developments seem likely today.

THE PROTEST AT HM PRISON MAZE

The purpose of this letter is to describe recent events at the prison, which involve our taking a stand to which the prisoners may well react adversely. We therefore suggest that the nature of the stand, and the reasons for it, should be passed on by you to Dermot Nally in Dublin, in order that the Irish Government are forewarned. Our stand could become public quite soon and be a subject for discussion at a meeting of the National H-Block Committee Conference to take place in Dublin this weekend.

The position at the prison is that some 100 prisoners have ceased to foul their cells and are housed in clean, furnished cells. But they have continued their protest by refusing to wash and shave, wear prison clothing or to undertake work. As we had expected, the prisoners have today presented us with a renewed attempt to test the principles by which the Government has always stood on this issue. They are trying to put us in a position where either we grant a point which they can claim as a concession of principle, or we take a stand on a point which they would represent as a minor one.

The latest development is that the prisoners who have now de-escalated their action to a clean protest in furnished cells have indicated that they wish to be regarded as "non-protesting prisoners", and that in consequence:-

1. They want to wash, shave and have a haircut;
2. They will keep their own cells clean;
3. They will go to Reception to be photographed in their new clean state;
4. They do not want then to be moved (as would be the normal practice for those leaving the protest) to a new wing for conforming prisoners;
5. They will undertake full-time education; but

6. They will/....

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6. They will not undertake the full range of prison work;
7. They will expect once cleaned up to be issued both with prison civilian clothing and their own leisure clothing.

The first three steps are part of the normal procedure for prisoners leaving the protest, and as such are quite acceptable. But items 5, 6 and 7 show quite clearly that they are not prepared to undertake the full range of prison activities and are seeking to establish a slightly different regime for themselves which distinguishes them from other prisoners.

On the Secretary of State's instructions, the Governor has told them that although they can wash and shave and can have prison issue civilian clothing, the regime they are asking for is out of the question. There is no separate category of "non-protesting" prisoners: if they conform with the full prison routine they will be given the full range of privileges, including leisure clothing. They will be reminded that all of that was made quite clear by the Secretary of State's statement of 19 December, copies of which were given to all of them.

We were always certain that a test of this sort would arise. Given that we should in any event have had to stand on the declared principles (no special regime for "political prisoners", no control by prisoners of the prison regime) the timing is in two senses quite convenient. First, the prisoners' request was made early enough in the working day for us to establish whether they really were willing to conform, especially by accepting direction on work, before we had to give them their leisure clothing. Second, following the Stronge murders, and the murders of one regular and one UDR soldier this week, the PIRA has reminded the general public of the shocking nature of its members' crimes, and has provoked public figures (including some who have a degree of sympathy for the protesters) into outright condemnation. We shall of course be making use of the latter point in meeting any suggestions that we should have conceded any of the prisoners' unacceptable suggestions.

To avoid delay in letting you (and Dublin) know of these developments, I shall have an account of the prisoners' response in a later letter or, if necessary, a telephone call.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Francis Richards in the FCO, and to David Wright.

*Yours ever,
Ry Harrington.*

R A HARRINGTON

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