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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

*Ireland*



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE  
GREAT GEORGE STREET,  
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

*hs  
Phnt*

*Prime Minister*

*(2)*

Michael Alexander Esq  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1

*This should have been in last night's box  
but you may still like to be aware of the  
background.*

*24 March 1980*

*Phnt - 26/3*

*ms*

*Dear Mr. Alexander*

Those taking part in the dirty protest at the Maze Prison, and those outside who support them, now realise that their campaign to secure special category status for all terrorist prisoners is failing. Their propaganda has not succeeded in sustaining significant public interest in Northern Ireland or elsewhere. The Secretary of State continues to put across the Government's determination not to yield on the principle, while keeping the regime in the prison under constant review, with the purpose of making it as humane as possible consistent with the state of the protest.

It is a measure of our success that what attention now remains is largely concentrated on humanitarian aspects. It is also a symptom of the desperation of the protestors that there is renewed talk of hunger strikes at the Maze before long, in addition to a recent extension of a dirty protest to part of the women's prison at Armagh, where the regime has nevertheless been kept to its previous liberal character. The Secretary of State is ready, of course, to deal with any hunger strikes, under Government policy as endorsed by the Prime Minister last November, but he also intends to make clear before the event that there is no point in such action by protestors, nor reasonable cause. This is an approach clearly shared by Cardinal O Fiaich, who has recently taken up a constructive and helpful attitude towards the protest, by others in the Catholic Church from whose community all the dirty protestors come, and by John Hume and colleagues in the SDLP who see a possibility of defusing the protest which remains a worrying and potentially explosive issue in the Catholic community.

Action needs to be taken now if it is to have optimum effect - that is, in due time before Easter, which is always a fraught period in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, the Secretary of State intends to make a statement by way of an answer to an inspired written Question on 26 March, dealing with special category status and conditions of the protestors.

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The Home Secretary to whom he has spoken agrees with what he has in mind; and he also has the agreement of the Chief Constable and the GOC who have been kept informed of developments.

The statement is to be in two parts.

The first part will note that some admissions to special category status continue because the offences were committed before 1 March 1976 (which is the practice that the present administration inherited and represented the Labour Government's first step to the phasing out of special category status.) All admissions to special category status will stop in respect of persons charged on or after 1 April. With the passage of time the present provision has become increasingly anomalous and helps to keep the protest alive.

The second part of the statement will make more generous provision for correspondence and visits, but will not put the protestors in as good a position as conforming prisoners. It will also as a humanitarian measure permit them to take daily exercise, which they have so far refused to take, in regulation PT kit (short sleeved vests etc) instead of full prison uniform.

The statement will accordingly reinforce the evidence of the Government's determination not to yield on special category status and will encourage those of good will, who are concerned with the humanitarian aspects of the protest, to influence the protestors to co-operate. If the protestors refuse to take up any part of the provisions made available, we will be able to demonstrate yet again, but even more convincingly that they are bringing their conditions on themselves. (Up until now they have generally refused to take up the newspapers we have made available to them; and they destroy chairs we put back in their cells.) If they do co-operate in the measures, we shall have taken another step to defuse the protest. In any event, the Secretary of State will continue to monitor the situation at the Maze very closely.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Home Secretary, Lord Chancellor, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Defence Secretary, Attorney General and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely

May Dingle

P.P. M W HOPKINS

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24 MAR 1980

The Secretary of State has been advised that the Department of Justice has received information from the Attorney General regarding the activities of the [redacted] and [redacted] in the [redacted] area.

The Department of Justice is currently reviewing this information.

The Department of Justice will continue to monitor the activities of the [redacted] and [redacted] in the [redacted] area. The Department of Justice is currently reviewing this information. The Department of Justice is currently reviewing this information. The Department of Justice is currently reviewing this information.

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