



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

13 November 1980

*You Kinneir,*

Thank you for your letter of 23 October about the prisoners who have been conducting a protest at Maze Prison, and some of whom have recently started a hunger strike.

The protest movement, and the hunger strike itself, are in pursuit of a demand for privileged conditions distinct from those permitted to other convicted persons. Their objective is to establish a political justification for the crimes that they have committed. Many of these men have been convicted of the most heinous crimes: in the case of the seven men at present on hunger strike, for instance, counts of murder, attempted murder, armed robbery and explosives offences. The Government cannot concede the principle that those who have committed such crimes for what they claim are "political" motives, are not as culpable as those who have committed similar crimes for other reasons. To accept that a political motivation in some way excuses such crimes would affront all who have suffered so grievously from terrorist violence over the past decade in Northern Ireland. It would encourage the use of violence as a means of obtaining political objectives. Moreover it would prolong the conflict in Northern Ireland, since the tension between the two communities there would be gravely increased.

It is a misconception that the conditions in which the protesting prisoners live have been imposed upon them by the prison authorities; these conditions are entirely of their own creation, and they could simply restore them to a normal state by conforming to the rules which other prisoners have to obey. This was confirmed by the European Commission of Human Rights, which

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recently considered an application by four of the prisoners concerned. The Commission stated explicitly that "these conditions are self-imposed by the applicants as part of their protest for "special category status" and, "were they motivated to improve them, could be eliminated almost immediately".

Nevertheless, the Government are very conscious of their obligation to care for those in their custody to the best of their ability, however difficult that may be made for the prison authorities by the prisoners themselves. With that in mind, the Government have introduced over the past several months a number of measures, which if the protesting prisoners would take advantage of them, would materially alleviate their condition. But they have declined. Most recently the Government announced their intention to abolish prison uniform for all prisoners in Northern Ireland and to substitute for it a range of civilian-type clothing. The protestors have dismissed this too, even though one of the features of prison life to which they most object is the obligation to wear prison uniform.

The Government will continue to keep all aspects of prisoners' living and working conditions under review, guided by a humane and responsive approach to the needs of the case. They remain most anxious to resolve the problem, and will not neglect any opportunity of doing so.

Yours sincerely  
Raymond DeLia

His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Rennes