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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland 4



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
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9 January 1981

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Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London
SW1

Prime Minister

*You will wish to see the statement at flag
A & to be aware of the background in this
letter. I have spoken to the Taoiseach's office
along the lines summarised in flag B.*

Dear Michael,

THE MAZE PRISON

The position today in the Maze Prison is that the dirty protest continues and our efforts to bring it to an end continue to be unsuccessful, although a significant number of individual prisoners have ended the protest.

My Secretary of State, after the discussion with the Governor and officials of the Prison Service yesterday, approved a proposal to make another attempt to unwind the protest early next week by moving a small number of protesting prisoners into clean cells fitted out with furniture and bedding. This move will be carefully explained in advance to all the protesting prisoners and to those who will be offered clean furnished cells, as an initiative by the Governor to help bring the protest to an end without requiring any prior commitment from them or any promise of a specific response - there is some reason to believe that it is the first step which is proving an insuperable barrier for the prisoners to cross. We are not confident that this move will work but the Secretary of State is convinced that we ought to try it and be seen to be doing so, so that the Government's position remains positive and constructive even if we remain frustrated in our wish to bring the protest to an end.

The Secretary of State thinks it essential that we should muster support from all who were concerned in the effort to bring the hunger strike to an end; and he wishes to make the Government's intention widely known in the community in Northern Ireland. He is therefore sending to people of influence a note explaining what has happened at the Maze since 19 December and what we are going to do next. I enclose a copy at Annex A. He intends also to issue this statement to the press in London and Belfast this afternoon.

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There is significance in the timing of these moves. First, the Secretary of State wishes to have put the Government in a good position before he answers questions about Northern Ireland in Parliament next Thursday, 15 January. Secondly, the hard men in the Maze are trying to engineer a second hunger strike in order to recover if they can the ground lost before Christmas, and we have reason to believe that they may announce their intention of a further hunger strike on Monday, or perhaps even over this weekend. It is important that the Government's next move should become public knowledge before the threat of a renewed hunger strike appears, otherwise it will seem that it is only a response to that threat.

It is now becoming apparent that one of the priests talking to the leaders of the protesters, Father Meagher - who has close connections with Dublin - has been enticed by the PIRA ring-leader in the Maze, Mr Sands, into trying to negotiate alterations to the regime which we have most carefully and precisely set out. We cannot entertain this and will be making it clear to Father Meagher that there can be no such negotiation. In view of his standing in Dublin we think it would be advisable if you were to use your channels to let it be known that Father Meagher has now, so far as we are concerned, no credibility. I attach a speaking note (Annex B) which you might like to use for this purpose. As you will see it also refers to the text at Annex A which we shall be sending to HM Ambassador in Dublin this afternoon.

I am sending a copy of this letter and enclosures to the Private Secretaries to the Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for Defence and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins
M W HOPKINS

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SPEAKING NOTE

1. Justin Staples will be getting to you during the day a copy of a note on the present situation in HMP Maze which the Secretary of State has sent out to all those who took a constructive interest in ending the hunger strike. The note is also being given to the press this afternoon. You should know that lying behind this is our knowledge from intercepted letters that the hard men amongst the protesters in the Maze, led by Bobby Sands, intend to announce on Monday that there will be a further hunger strike commencing a few weeks hence. The letters make clear that Sands' object is to gain concessions on clothing, work and freedom of movement which go beyond the humanitarian regime on offer and would amount to recognising the protesters as political prisoners.
 2. Father Meagheris busted: he has been trapped by Sands into putting forward propositions which Sands (but not Meagher seemingly) sees very clearly as conferring the 5 demands to these prisoners, ie political status. We cannot negotiate with Sands, via Meagher or anybody else. So we are continuing to use Toner and Murphy and other channels of communication (not negotiation).
 3. As you will see the Government intends that when the next group of protesters are moved to clean cells furniture will be provided for some of them: and if they do not ^{damage or} foul their furniture they will receive the prison supplied civilian clothing and the others in the group will be offered furniture and clothing. We are deliberately doing this without asking for any kind of move by the prisoners in advance or promise of a response, as a gesture of good intent.
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