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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

2 July 1981

Dear Stephen,

MEETING WITH CARDINAL O'FIAICH

The Prime Minister held a meeting at 2015 yesterday evening with Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Lennon. Your Secretary of State was present.

The Prime Minister said that she was sorry that she and the Cardinal had not been able to meet when she was last in Belfast. She had been especially anxious during her visit to convey to the community of Northern Ireland the message that the Government would do everything it could to ensure that the Province enjoyed a just, equitable and impartial rule of law, but that this was as much as the state could do. She had said during her visit that there was nothing she could do to make people kind, considerate and thoughtful to each other. There was no role for legislation here. She prized reason and fair play; but she recognised that reason could not always overcome deeply-held feelings. She hoped that the Cardinal would be able to tell her things about the feelings of the minority community that she was unaware of, or that he might be able to express to her in a more vivid way what she already knew about their feelings. To her it was appalling that people should go on hunger strike, and she was the first to want to see it ended. The conditions in the Maze would stand comparison with prison conditions anywhere else in the world, and she did not think that they could be the driving force behind the hunger strike. Perhaps the hunger strikers were protesting in this way because they had been ordered to do so by people outside.

Cardinal O'Fiaich said that he did not believe the hunger strikers were acting on external instructions. The impetus for their protests was coming from within the prison. He was at one with the Prime Minister in wanting to see an end to the hunger strike. He had felt a glimmer of hope when the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace had produced their statement a fortnight earlier. He thought that the prisoners might see the Commission as an independent group who were interested in their future and might therefore be ready to listen to them. But that would require them to be allowed access to the hunger strikers. He recognised that this request was difficult for the Government because it would look as though the Commission was becoming involved in negotiations between the Government and the prisoners, but he thought that it would be helpful if the

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Commission could see Mr. Michael Alison again and then visit the prisoners. He would like to suggest that Father Crilly, who was a relation of one of the hunger strikers, and one or two other members of the Commission should be allowed in. They would not be conducting a negotiation but they could explain to the hunger strikers what the position was. There would be trouble if the hunger strikers were allowed to die just because prison regulations said that certain types of person could not visit prisoners. The Government had, after all, allowed three members of the Dail to go into the Maze some weeks ago. He believed that there was just a hope that the Commission could find a solution and so he urged the Government to allow them access to the prisoners.

Your Secretary of State said that there was no problem about allowing Father Crilly to see the prisoners, whether as a priest or as a relative of one of them. But he could not let the Commission as a body go into the Maze. Otherwise a lot of other organisations would ask for the same facilities. There were many people who wanted to see the hunger strikers, and it was essential that the Government adhered to the practice of allowing access only to prisoners' relatives, lawyers and priests. In any case, if it was thought that the Government were negotiating with the strikers or were using the Commission as negotiators by proxy, this would be likely to produce a strong reaction in the Protestant community and thus put at risk Catholic inhabitants of Northern Ireland.

The Cardinal said that that argument could be pushed too far. He recognised that a balance had to be preserved vis-a-vis the hard line Protestants, but it should be remembered that there were Protestant prisoners in the Maze as well as Republicans. The central question was how he and the Prime Minister and Mr. Atkins could help each other to bring the hunger strike to the end which they all so much desired. The longer the strike went on, the more beneficial it was to the PIRA. The strike was undoubtedly bringing recruits to the PIRA. The middle ground in Northern Ireland was evaporating, as Mr. Fitt's defeat in the recent local elections had shown.

Bishop Lennon said that he had a number of nephews who had hitherto not been involved in the Republican movement. But he was distressed to see the shift of opinion among them since the hunger strike had started. Young people like this were put in an impossible position. If they criticised the PIRA, they were dubbed as Unionist quislings. If they criticised the British Army or the RUC, they were labelled as members of the PIRA. The problem of the hunger strike was too urgent to quibble about whether someone was allowed to see prisoners as a priest or as a relative or as a member of the ICJP. Replying to a question by the Prime Minister, Bishop Lennon added that the hunger strikers were taking the action they were because they felt - however misguidedly - that they and the community they came from were suffering injustices.

/ The Prime Minister

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The Prime Minister said that she could not agree to sanctify crime by giving those on the protest political status, for to do so would be tantamount to saying that they had a licence to kill for political reasons. It was of course true that there were prisoners in the Maze who already had special status but that was for historical reasons and she could not change that situation.

Cardinal O'Fiaich said that he was not asking for special category status and he had made this clear in a telegram to the Prime Minister. But he wanted to draw her attention to the facts in the North as they were, whether we liked them or not. For example, some of the prisoners were very young when they began their sentences, and many of them were long term prisoners. He was not describing these points as special factors but he believed that they did make for a different situation. The prisoners were using that different situation in their own interests. We all wanted to bring the situation to an end, and he had offered many suggestions for doing so. He believed that we had had a solution in our grasp last year, a solution which he and Bishop Daly had brought about by working through the priests and the prisoners' relatives. The prisoners had wanted to get off the hook of the protest and so had the Government. If all prisoners in Northern Ireland had been allowed to wear their own clothes, the whole protest would have ended. He had thought that the Government were going to agree to this but of course what the Government had conceded was that the prisoners could wear civilian-type dress supplied by the prison authorities. If we could now only get back to that stage where a solution had been so close, everybody would be glad.

The Prime Minister said that she did not believe this was possible. The Government had decided, before last autumn's strike had started, that civilian-type clothing should be allowed. More generally, the Government had got into a position where the prison conditions were very good and were better, for example, than those in United States prisons. This position had then been made clear to the hunger strikers who had in due course called off their protest. There was no reason why the present hunger strikers should seek better conditions.

Cardinal O'Fiaich agreed that the conditions in the Maze were potentially among the best in the world. But the fact was that the atmosphere in the Maze was one of very deep hostility between the prison staff and the inmates. This contrasted sharply with Magilligan and Armagh.

Your Secretary of State said that the prisoners were not on strike against the atmosphere in the Maze. They were on strike to win special category status and not to secure a change in the prison conditions. The ICJP had offered some ideas for resolving the situation, but the PIRA's reaction had been negative.

/ Bishop Lennon

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Bishop Lennon said that the decision to go on a hunger strike was a very difficult one to take. The strikers were young and did not want to die. They did not embark upon this course lightly. But he was not saying they were forced to take it.

The Prime Minister said that she doubted whether the hunger strikers understood the prison regime which was on offer. They were chosen to go on the hunger strike and had to carry the cross for the cause. They dared not refuse to do so.

Cardinal O'Fiaich repeated that the hunger strike must be brought to an end. He did not know what special category or political status was. To him it meant nothing. One could take any five conditions and call them political status. He accepted that the Government had many constraints on the action open to them. The Church similarly had very little room for manoeuvre, though he wished to point out that it had condemned the use of violence consistently. The ICJP had made proposals for bringing the situation to an end and he would like to know what alternative way forward there was. If the present situation was allowed to continue indefinitely, moderate people would become hostile to the Government. If another hunger striker died, tension would build up again; and if eight died, there would be chaos in Northern Ireland. It was essential to establish what the hunger strikers would come off their protest for: what it was they went on the protest for was now irrelevant.

The Prime Minister said that she believed that the hunger strike could be brought to an end tomorrow if those taking part in it were given the necessary orders. She was not prepared to barter. She could not accept the prisoners' argument that their crimes were committed for political reasons and were therefore different from ordinary offences. Murder was murder, whatever its motive. All criminals, whatever their religion or political beliefs, had to be treated in the same way in prison. The law was the same for everybody. It had to be applied justly and impartially to all sections of the community.

Bishop Lennon said that there was a strong feeling amongst the young Catholics in Northern Ireland that the law was not applied fairly, and there was a great deal of resentment of which the hunger strike was only a part. The Catholic community's sense of injustice went back for many many years. They had been treated unjustly by the Stormont regime, and Westminster had done nothing about it. This was the background against which the hunger strike had to be seen.

The Prime Minister said that if the Republican community really believed that what it was fighting against was the accumulated wrongs of 400 years, she had to make it clear that there was nothing she could do about it. But she doubted whether this was really so.

/ Cardinal O'Fiaich

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Cardinal O'Fiaich said that much of Northern Ireland's problems sprang from the fact that the Border was the most artificial division ever created. The whole of Northern Ireland was a lie from start to finish. At root what the hunger strikers believed they were striking for was a united Ireland.

Bishop Lennon added that he thought that we were seeing the beginnings of an eventual solution to the problem. What was required was a British declaration of intention to withdraw from Northern Ireland, though he accepted that withdrawal could not be immediate and that no timetable should be attached to such a declaration.

Your Secretary of State said that this was to ignore the one million Protestants who formed the majority. The people of Northern Ireland must seek to solve their problems by persuasion and not by violence, whether against others or, as with the hunger strikers, against oneself. The Republicans should try to persuade the Protestants that the unification of Ireland was a desirable objective. The people of Northern Ireland should sit down and work out their own future. In the meantime all the British Government could do was to maintain the absolute impartiality of the law.

Cardinal O'Fiaich asked when the time would come when the British Government would say that its presence in Northern Ireland was divisive - as it was. The Catholic community did not regard itself as British and did not want British government. There was no hope for British policy if the Government believed that the ordinary people of Fermanagh thought of themselves as being as British as the people of Yorkshire did. Rather, British policy for the future should be stated as a strong desire to bring together all sections of the Northern Ireland community in peace and harmony as a step to bringing all parts of Ireland together in peace and harmony. The only solution was to bring together all the Irish people under a government of Irishmen, whether in a federal or a unitary state.

The Prime Minister said that the course advocated by the Cardinal could not become the policy of the British Government because it was not acceptable to the majority of the population of Northern Ireland. There was no point in complaining about partition: the border was a fact and she could not change that fact. She wanted to see the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland was just as much a part as was England or Scotland or Wales, live in peace and cooperation with the Republic. Those who sought a united island of Ireland must learn that what could not be won by persuasion would not be won by force.

Bishop Lennon said that he did not believe that the hunger strikers would be persuaded to give up their protest. Prison conditions were irrelevant. The prisoners were not on hunger

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strike because of physical conditions. They had embarked on the strike because they believed - rightly or wrongly - that they were being treated unjustly.

The Prime Minister said that their discussion had been valuable because it had been frank. She felt that they understood one another better as a result. She regarded the meeting as a private one and she did not intend to reveal that it had taken place. But if it leaked, she would not be able to deny that there had been a meeting. In that event she proposed to say that they had had a wide-ranging and very open discussion of the situation in Northern Ireland.

Cardinal O'Fiaich agreed to proceed in this way. He did not want the meeting to become public knowledge. He thought it only good that they had all spoken so bluntly and openly.

The Prime Minister's visitors left at 2150.

I am sending copies of this letter to Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever,

Alwi Whittman.

Stephen Boys-Smith, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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