



3 JD

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

19 July 1981

Dear Mr. Stallard,

Thank you for your letter of 17 June on behalf of the Parliamentary Labour Party's Northern Ireland Group about the prison situation in Northern Ireland. I am sorry about the delay in replying, to which you referred in your later letter of 16 July. As you will be aware, there have been a number of developments on this front recently, and I wanted to take account of these in my response.

I am grateful for your Group's re-affirmation of its opposition to political status and its support for the Government's policy on prison conditions as set out in the statement of 23 October 1980. As you know, it remains our policy to maintain the humane and liberal regime currently available to all prisoners in Northern Ireland prisons, and, wherever practicable, we are prepared to improve them. This was made clear in Humphrey Atkins' statement of 30 June and again in his further statement of 8 July which spelt out in detail what was available to the hunger strikers and the protesting prisoners if only they would agree to conform to the prison rules. I enclose copies of both those statements.

I entirely share your Group's deep concern over the difficult situation which has arisen as a result of the hunger strike and the consequent increase in tension throughout the Province, which benefits no one but those who seek conflict and violence. In this context you particularly mention the views of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, who have recently followed up their suggestion in the areas of clothing, association and work (referred to in your letter) by engaging in talks with the hunger strikers and later with

/ Michael

JS

Michael Alison. We welcomed the constructive interest of the Commission, and we were content for them to talk to the hunger strikers and to Government representatives so that they could clearly understand the positions of both parties and perhaps help to dispel any mistrust by the prisoners of the Government's publicly stated intentions.

Unfortunately it became apparent some days ago that the ICJP's intervention had not persuaded the hunger strikers to end their fast: indeed, the hunger strikers made clear that they did not want to see the ICJP any more. It is true, as you mention in your letter of 16 July, that in their statement on 4 July the protesting prisoners indicated that they were not now seeking a different regime from that available to prisoners generally. If that means that they are now more concerned about prison conditions, I hope they will respond to the Government's frequently stated commitment (spelt out in some detail in the statement of 8 July) that there is scope for further development of the regime. But we will not introduce any such development under duress.

Those speaking on behalf of the hunger strikers have accused the Government of intransigence. There are certainly principles which we are not prepared to break: we will not concede political status to particular offenders, and we will not hand over control of the prisons for which we are responsible. But we will stand by our commitment to provide the best practicable regime. It is consistent with that commitment, and in response to the possibility that the prisoners are now concerned about prison conditions and not political status, that we have decided to accept the offer of the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Northern Ireland prisons and to report to the Secretary of State. The ICRC is an independent body of international repute, and I hope that the hunger strikers will recognise that,

/ will

will respond to our long-standing willingness to improve the regime, and will end the action which is causing such grief to their families and - as those master-minding the hunger strike well know - such tension and violence throughout Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Thatcher

Jock Stallard, Esq., M.P.