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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

LONDON SW1P 3AJ

2 January 1981

Mike Pattison Esq  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1

Dear Mike,

THE MAZE PRISON

You asked me for an up-date of the position in the prisons in Northern Ireland. You will appreciate that because of his absence from the office today, what follows has not been seen by the Secretary of State.

Since the hunger strike ended on 18 December 1980 the "dirty" protest has continued, although the number taking part has fallen from 466 to 446. The 20 prisoners who have given up their protest have, as promised in my Secretary of State's statement of 19 December, had all their privileges restored. All conforming prisoners in the Maze Prison, including the 20 who have given up their protest, have been issued with the new civilian-type clothing.

It is too early to say whether the "dirty" protest will now begin to crumble. The psychological barrier for men who have sustained such a protest for such a long time to conform even to a liberal prison régime cannot be expected, even at best, to be surmounted quickly. In spite of clear statements by the Government of its position, there still seems to be some uncertainty and confusion among the protesters who may well in fact be looking for some concession going beyond the position set out by Mr Atkins on 19 December, so that they may seek to turn the defeat of the hunger strike into a victory for the "dirty" protest.

The Government's position is clear: the régime outlined by my Secretary of State applies to conforming prisoners. The privileges of association, of the wearing of privately-owned leisure clothing and of the earning of remission are not available to prisoners who refuse to wear the new issue of civilian-type prison clothing during the working day, or to work if so required. At the same time the Governor, whilst staying within the terms of our statement of 19 December (a copy of which was of course given to each prisoner) will act sensitively to assist those prisoners who may now wish to conform. Immediately after the ending of the hunger strike some prisoners were moved into clean cells which they proceeded to foul as before. It is now being explained individually to the next

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Prime Minister

This up-date may be helpful as background for your radio interview on Sunday. MAD 2/1.

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batch of prisoners due for removal to clean cells that if they do not foul those cells, they will be given a bed and bedding and normal cell furniture. We shall see how they react.

Meanwhile, public opinion in the Province at large is calm and there is now wide acceptance that the Government defeated the hunger strike without making concessions. Since the major battle has been won, there is less public concern with the lesser battle over the "dirty" protest. Scare stories about a resumption of the hunger strike appear in the Press from time to time (such as that in today's "Guardian" based on a statement by a group in Londonderry which they withdrew almost immediately, no doubt on instructions from more senior Republicans). But up to now such stories are not being given very wide credence in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the failure of the last attempt.

Secret sources indicate that Republicans close to the protest allegedly reflecting also opinion amongst the prisoners, are confused and disappointed that the "dirty" protest has not been brought to an end, effectively on their terms of no wearing of Government-issue clothing and no commitment to work. There is talk in such circles about calling a renewed hunger strike not with the intention of carrying it through, but as a gesture designed to shake the Government's resolve. From the same sources, we learn that some Republicans are inclined to give the Government the benefit of the doubt on the basis that the holiday season has inhibited moves by the Government to make concessions.

There appears to be no call for any immediate further statement by the Government reaffirming its position, but this could be necessary in the course of next week. Meanwhile, the normal process of background briefing for the Press goes on.

*Yours sincerely  
Mike Hopkins*

M W HOPKINS

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