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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Beland 5



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

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*For
P. R. M.*

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

16 January 1981 (2)

Prime Minister.

Dear Michael,

The effort to 'unwind' the protest has now entered a particularly tricky phase when the issue of civilian type clothing + of the prisoner's own clothing for business is in question. I am not very optimistic that it will be possible to manage this satisfactorily.

THE MAZE PROTESTS

This letter is to bring you up to date on the developments in the Maze protest since Mike Hopkins' letter of 9 January.

The dirty protest continues with a few protesters coming off the protest most days, but the total still protesting remains higher than before the hunger strike began. The seven original hunger strikers remain in the prison hospital where they are treated as sick conforming prisoners. The dirty protest by the women prisoners at Armagh also continues.

In the letter of 9 January we explained the next steps which my Secretary of State proposed to take to unwind the protest. We have since done what we said we would do, namely: we informed all the protesting prisoners individually by means of a note from the Governor on Saturday what was going to happen and explained that we hoped it would eventually lead to a conforming regime; on Monday we moved half a wing of protesters into clean, furnished cells and the other half into clean, unfurnished cells in the same wing; on Tuesday morning the prisoners had not fouled or damaged the cells or the furniture so the Governor moved furniture and bedding into the clean, unfurnished cells.

Since this move had gone well, the Governor gave all the protesting prisoners a second note on Wednesday informing them that a further move into a completely furnished wing of clean cells would take place on Thursday. Furthermore, the note said that any of the protesters in the clean furnished cells could have prison issue civilian clothing if they asked for it. That move, which included Sands, the protesters' spokesman, also went smoothly and we now have two wings of clean, furnished cells housing prisoners who, although they continue to refuse to wash, shave or wear prison clothing, are not fouling their cells or damaging their furniture.

My Secretary of State is satisfied with progress so far. He and NIO officials have been closely engaged in every detail of the winding down process both with the prisons administration in Belfast and the Governor. The Governor has not put a foot wrong, and has handled a very sensitive situation with great skill.

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The Governor, with our full backing, is quite clear that the protesting prisoners cannot be given the privilege of their own leisure clothing to wear at evenings and weekends before their intention to engage in the normal day to day activities of the prison has been demonstrated. If they had it and then insisted - in breach of Prison Rules - on wearing it during the normal working day it could precipitate a situation where prison officers would have to go into cells and forcibly undress the prisoners to take back their leisure clothing. We have evidence that some quarters would welcome such a development since it could give rise to allegations of assault on prisoners by prison officers and vice versa; provoke the murder of a prison officer; and lead to subsequent outrage and disorder from both communities including their paramilitaries.

Our aim is to retain the initiative and so prevent the chain of events described above from taking place. In doing so, we shall continue our policy of explaining our actions clearly to the prisoners, prison staff, the media and all interested parties. In keeping with this, the women protesters at Armagh will receive a note bringing them up to date with developments at the Maze and encouraging them also to end their protest.

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

Yours ever,
R. A. Harrington

R A HARRINGTON

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