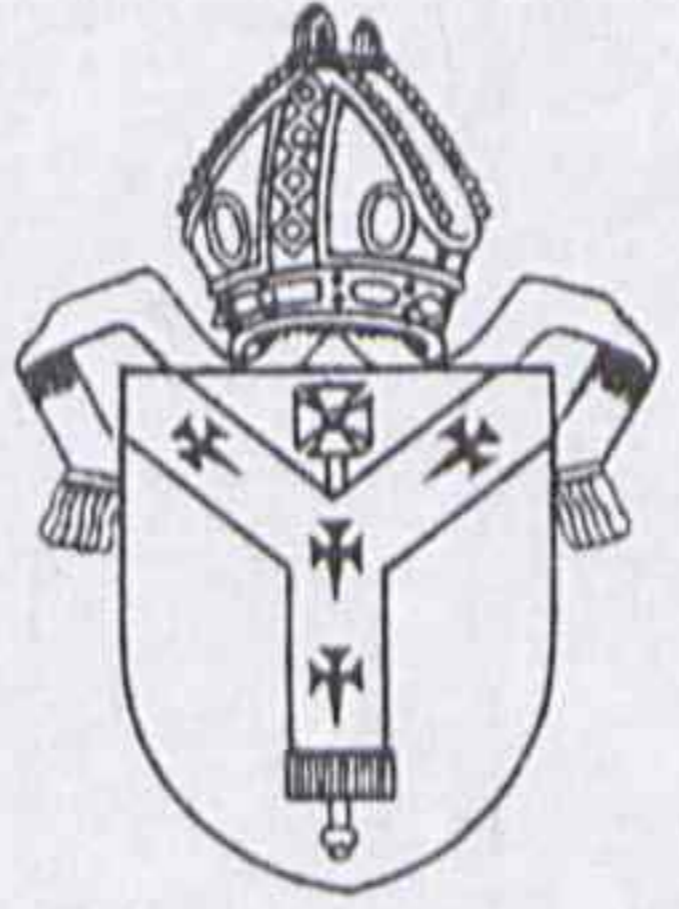


BY with NO reply

Prime Minister
I have asked NIO for a draft reply for you to send to this letter. They are aware of these proposals. They feel the point at A is fairly crucial, and are unlikely to be positive in their reply.
wm
20/8



LAMBETH PALACE, LONDON, SE1 7JU

ms.

STRICTLY PRIVATE
AND CONFIDENTIAL

19th August 1981

Dear Prime Minister,

I have promised to act as a 'postman' and relay to you, in the utmost confidence, a series of proposals which have been presented to me as a possible way of ending the hunger strikes in the Maze Prison.

A/

These proposals have reached me via Canon John Baker, of Westminster Abbey, who in turn was approached by those who claim to be able to speak for 'the leadership of the Provisional IRA'. The Northern Ireland Office has details of the line of communication. It is, of course, true that this 'link' is not necessarily with those who control the situation in the prison, but the proposals themselves seem to me sufficiently specific and carefully considered to merit notice, while I feel that I am not in a position to refuse to act as what an official of the Northern Ireland Office described as a 'sterile channel of communication'. Perhaps in its relation to some larger picture, my reported message can assist in some way in the resolution of the problem which I know troubles you and which I am conscious, from my recent travels in the United States, continues to damage our standing abroad.

Summary of the Proposals

The Government has said that it is willing to make certain changes in the prison regulations for all prisoners, but will not do so under duress and certainly not until the hunger strike and protest stop. Logically, this led to the rejection of the Government of the Republic of Ireland's suggestion that changes in conditions should be made now for prisoners who conform and extended to others when they ended their protest.

(Cont.)

2.

STRICTLY PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

The New Compromise Suggestion

An independent Monitoring Committee should be set up, composed of respected, non-party figures. It is suggested that the membership should include among others a Quaker, someone acceptable to the PIRA and someone representing Protestant opinion.

The task of this non-Government body would be to verify that the reform package had been put into effect. It is alleged that such a package of reforms, agreeable to both sides, does exist.

As soon as the Committee is established, the protest, including the hunger strikes, would be abandoned. Any changes in prison regime could then be made after the protest is over and so not under duress.

Naturally, the scheme depends on total secrecy until everything is worked out.

I am conscious that many questions are begged in this 'message'. If the 'leadership' are keen on some kind of independent monitoring committee, why has the opportunity of the Red Cross visits not been taken? Are the hunger strikers themselves, or people outside the prison, controlling the situation? Does a package of generally-agreed reforms exist?

I felt, however, that it was my duty to pass on the suggestion as I received it. I was asked to address you personally, but I have also naturally informed officials at the Northern Ireland Office, who were so helpful to me in providing an excellent briefing before my recent visit to Ireland.

I was sorry that you were not able to escape entirely the attentions of the photographers, even on your holiday, and I also regret that your August has to be disturbed by an over-lengthy letter from the Archbishop.

With all good wishes,

Yours ever,

FR Robert Cantwell

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP,
10 Downing Street,
London SW1.