



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

17 July 1981

MS
 Dear Michael.

Prime Minister

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Paul 17/7

NORTHERN IRELAND : HUNGER STRIKE

In his letter of 6 July to Brian Fall, Clive Whitmore asked for advice on Sir N Henderson's suggestion that the Friends of Ireland might have an observer with any International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) team invited to visit the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland.

The Lord Privy Seal agrees that we should do all we can to have the Friends of Ireland Committee on our side. This is of course made all the more important by the Irish Government's intercession with President Reagan on 14 July. Consideration was given to Sir N Henderson's suggestion in the course of discussion of the modalities of the ICRC's present visit. We and NIO concluded that it would not be right to try to involve the Friends of Ireland directly in the approach to the ICRC. The ICRC's status in this matter is as a respected professional organisation with substantial world-wide experience of prisons, carefully divorced from national and international politics. They could be expected to reject any proposal to attach to their team an amateur with a political interest. Moreover, the addition of such a person to an ICRC team might give the impression that the ICRC were being exploited for political and public relations purposes which (true or not) might lead to doubts about HMG's sincerity in inviting the ICRC to look at HM Prison Maze.

We have considered also whether it would be possible to invite a small delegation nominated by the Friends of Ireland to visit Northern Ireland for a comprehensive tour which would include a visit

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M O'D B Alexander Esq
 10 Downing Street



to Maze Prison. The aim would be to ensure that the Friends of Ireland gained a true picture of the situation, notably that in the Maze. But there are problems. Requests for meetings with prisoners would have to be handled with great care. It would have to be recognised that if the Friends of Ireland were admitted it might stimulate Congressman Biaggi's Ad Hoc Committee to make a similar request which would be awkward to handle. I understand that it is the NIO's strongly held view that it would not be acceptable to allow Congressman Biaggi or somebody connected with his Committee, into Maze.

There is a risk that the Friends of Ireland would use such a visit to make statements unhelpful to HMG intended primarily to satisfy the prejudices of their constituents. But most important is NIO's view, which we accept, that the most likely outcome of a visit by the Friends, not understanding the problems, is that they would conclude as the ICJP did that the hunger strike could be ended with only small concessions from HMG and when they found that this did not happen, make public statements that left our position worse than it was before. (Sir N Henderson points out in his telegram no 2162 of 15 July the danger that our action in bringing in the ICRC might be presented by the Friends of Ireland and others as another example of prevarication; if they had been to the prison, they might well have heard arguments which gave weight in their minds to such accusations.)

In the circumstances, we are inclined, therefore, to accept NIO's view that as long as the hunger strike continues, in its present form, we should not suggest to the Friends of Ireland that they should send a delegation; though it will be worth reconsidering the idea when the hunger strike is over. We shall be replying to Sir N Henderson in this sense.

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I am sending copies of this letter to John Halliday (Home Office), Stephen Boys-Smith (NIO) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

*Yours ever
Stephen Gomersall.*

S J Gomersall
Private Secretary to the
Lord Privy Seal