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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

15 June 1981

My dear Bishop

Thank you for your letter of 3 June. I was sorry we were not able to meet in Belfast; I understand your position and, in return, hope that you accept that there was no intention on our part to cause you any embarrassment.

I very much appreciate the full and frank way in which you wrote in your letter of your anxieties about the current situation in your area. I fully share that anxiety, and sought in my recent speech in Belfast to express it clearly and unambiguously. I admire and respect the courage and devotion of Church leaders such as yourself and other leaders who seek in these difficult times to reassure the community and to hold it together. You know that I and my colleagues care deeply about the sufferings of the Catholic community arising from the hunger strike and the disturbances to which it has given rise. The Government is determined to do all that it can to alleviate them and to resume progress towards tackling the wider problems of Northern Ireland.

We will weigh carefully what you say, and what is contained in the document drawn up by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace. But the Provisionals have made clear what they are after. There must be the gravest danger that any changes made now would simply encourage the Provisionals to press harder. The hunger strike would then be reinforced and with it the continuing distress in the Roman Catholic community.

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The next step must be for the hunger strike to end. The pointless waste of young lives, the anguish of relations and friends, the effect of the disturbance in the wider community - all this is of the keenest concern to the Government. The Government has already demonstrated its flexibility in dealing with the prison protests. It is committed to keeping the regime for all prisoners in Northern Ireland under review. We remain ready to facilitate any investigation that the European Human Rights Commission may wish to make in the course of considering the presently outstanding application or any fresh application which may be made.

I realise how the Provisionals are seeking to exploit the issue, and I realise how difficult the resulting situation is for community leaders, as for Government. We must all keep explaining what we are trying to achieve clearly, openly and with the fullest sympathy for what so many are having to bear.

signed

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The Right Reverend Edward Daly,
Bishop of Derry.