

Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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William Rickett, Esq
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Dear Willie,

You will by now have received the brief for the Prime Minister's meeting this evening with Cardinal O Fiaich.

You will be interested to know that we have received a brief account from Mr Waite at Lambeth Palace of the meeting this morning between the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal O Fiaich. This was apparently extremely cordial, and the foundation was laid for a friendly continuing relationship. Apparently the Cardinal expressed a positive reaction to yesterday's statement on prisons, seeing in it a sign of hope and the opportunity for further movement.

*Yours sincerely,
Noel Cornick*

NOEL CORNICK

BRIEF FOR MEETING OF PRIME MINISTER AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND WITH CARDINAL O FIAICH

Background: Recent Events

1. When the Prime Minister visited Northern Ireland on 28 May it was hoped that Cardinal O Fiaich would be among those that she met. But the shortness of the notice, compounded by inhibitions (for security reasons) about disclosing the visit in advance, meant that the Cardinal was unable to attend. These events produced at the time some feeling in his part that he had been discourteously treated. The Prime Minister wrote to him at the time and he, replying on 2 June, suggested a meeting during his visit to London to take part in ceremonies to commemorate the tricentenary of the execution of his predecessor, St Oliver Plunkett.
2. On 3 June the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace issued a statement about the prisons crisis which rejected "political status" but suggested that the problem might be resolved by changes (with safeguards) in certain aspects of the regime - working activity, association and clothing.
3. On 17 June the Irish Catholic Bishops put out a statement expressing their concern about the situation and endorsing the ICJP approach. Mr Atkins wrote to the Cardinal welcoming this statement; in reply, the Cardinal pressed for a Government reaction to the ICJP's statement.
4. On 30 June HMG issued a statement on NI prison regimes, related in part to the ICJP's proposals. Mr Alison has twice met the ICJP (records of the meetings are with No 10). Mr Alison has also sent a letter to the Commission (copy attached) which reflects HMG's public statement. It is to be agreed between us and the ICJP when that letter is to be published.

Objects of Meeting

The under-lying thought is that if the hunger strike leads to more deaths and therefore to renewed violence, the ability of the security forces to control the situation, and our ability to counter the increasing influence and strength of the PIRA, will depend upon the lead given by the leaders of moderate Catholic opinion. In this process, the Cardinal and the hierarchy play a crucial role. Against that background the suggested objects of the meeting are:

1. To assure the Cardinal, and through him his fellow-bishops and priests and the Catholic community, of HMG's continuing care and concern for that community, especially at a time when it is subject to stress resulting from the prisons crisis.
2. To express appreciation of the efforts of the Cardinal and other leaders to rally and reassure moderate Catholic opinion, especially as regards the hunger strike and PIRA violence generally, and to urge the continuance of those efforts.
3. To welcome the constructive approach to the hunger strike of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace - and the Bishops' Conference, and to explain HMG's position.
4. To assert that HMG is not wholly preoccupied with the prisons crisis. It is concerned also with political development in NI; with the development of the "unique relationship" with Dublin; and with making economic and social provision for NI on a healthy foundation. In pursuing all these policies, HMG is at pains to be even-handed as between the two parts of the community.

Speaking Note

1. Sorry a meeting in Belfast did not prove practicable and glad it has now proved possible to arrange one.
2. Providing good government for the divided community is a heavy responsibility on HMG. Contact at all levels with the leaders of the Catholic community (and, similarly, on the Protestant side) is important to HMG.
3. HMG anxious to assure Catholic community of its care and concern, especially at the present difficult time. We are fully aware of the pressures, and risk of alienation, arising from the prisons crisis. Object of PM's visit at the end of May was to bring reassurance. The lead given to the Catholic community by moderate and balanced church leaders is highly valued.
4. As regards the prisons, HMG faces a difficult problem. We have much appreciated the efforts of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace to understand all sides of the issue and to put forward in good faith suggestions for resolving it. We also warmly welcomed the statement of the Irish Bishops, about which Mr Atkins wrote to the Cardinal.
5. Recognise that Cardinal and others may be disappointed that HMG's statement on 30 June did not announce any changes, but was confined to restating position. But HMG's position needs to be made clear:

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- (a) No. conferring of "political status", in name or in fact - eg by conferring a preferential regime; no ceding to prisoners of control over prisons.
- (b) As regards the details of the regime, HMG has been flexible in the past and remains so. The present regime is a reasonable and in many respects generous one, as the detail of the statement brings out. And "there is scope for yet further development". But changes cannot be made overnight, or under duress.
- (c) The difficulty, for HMG in the ICJP's suggestions lies in their ambiguity. Seen in one light, they could be adopted without doing violence to the Government's principles. Seen in another light, they would take the protesting prisoners much of the way towards their "five demands" and, so, to being able to claim "political status", and to having secured control over what goes on in the prisons.

(d) As regards the specific demands of the protesters, the point about both prison work and association is that conceding what they ask would give them control over what they did and with whom. This point does not apply to the demand to be able to wear their own clothing all the time. The point there is two fold. First, to make that concession would create practical problems in the prison in terms of identifying prisoners and controlling their movements; and secondly, to give way on this point under duress would encourage the protesters to seek for more.

(e) There is no reason to believe that the prisoners' own expressed demands would be satisfied by adjustments of regime within the framework of HMG's basic principles. Hence there would be a grave risk, if changes were made while the hunger strike continued, that they would be seen as a weakening of the Government's resolve and would encourage the strikers to continue in the hope of obtaining all their demands.

(f) As regards the timing of the statement, HMG has been anxious for some time (and others have urged this on us) to restate its position on prison regimes during the "lull" in the deaths of hunger strikers. The dialogue with the ICJP has inevitably imposed a constraint. But what made it necessary to issue something now was the need to make an early response to Mr Haughey's recent statement.

6. HMG's concern for NI not limited to the prisons crisis. There is a need for political development - much thought has gone in to finding a way ahead. Social and economic policies important - a lot of resources go into NI. Dublin initiative will continue. In all these policies, HMG recognises need to be even-handed between two parts of community.