

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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TEXT OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S REPLY OF 15 JULY TO THE  
TAOISEACH'S LETTER OF 10 JULY 1981

1. I have studied most carefully your letter of 10 July expressing your concern about the impact upon your country of recent developments in the hunger strike in the Maze prison. The measure and nature of your concern was of course underlined and amplified by Dr Kelly and Professor Dooge when they saw Sir Ian Gilmour and Mr Atkins last Friday in London, of which meeting I have seen a full report, and reinforced in Professor Dooge's conversation with Lord Carrington in Brussels on Monday, on which he has briefed me personally.
2. There are a number of points in your letter, and in what passed at Friday's meeting, on which I must comment. But first let me assure you that I understand just how much the deaths in the Maze matter to your country, and know in particular of the significance for the Republic of Ireland of the fact that two Maze prisoners, including one hunger striker, are now members of the Dáil. Much of the uniqueness of the relationship between the Republic and the United Kingdom arises from the ways in which the interests of the north and south of Ireland touch upon each other. Sadly, terrorism - our common enemy - and the consequential problem of the prisoners in the Maze convicted of terrorist crimes are among these.
3. The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace (ICJP) have worked hard to find a solution. Her Majesty's Government admire the Commission's determination and dedication to its task and I do not wish in any way to denigrate their efforts. But they have in their statement of 9 July implied that Mr Alison, the Minister of State who conducted the talks with them, was guilty of bad faith in that he gave assurances which he later failed to fulfil. You say in your letter that you, as a Government, "are persuaded by this account". This is not the place to go in detail over precisely what was and was not said in some sixteen hours of talks (Mr Atkins did in fact traverse much of this ground with your colleagues last week); but I must say plainly that I totally repudiate the charge of bad faith. It may be that in such prolonged talks misunderstandings arose; but I must ask you to accept my word that Mr Alison, and through him the British Government have acted honourably throughout.
4. The truth is that the Commission have all along underestimated the constraint laid upon us by the need to retain proper control of, and apply a common regime within, a prison containing some 1,000 convicted criminals, many guilty of the most heinous crimes and drawn from all the paramilitary groups; and they have seriously-

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overestimated the possibility of persuading the hunger strikers (and, equally important, the Provisionals who control them) to accept their own compromise proposals. This last point has been amply demonstrated by the latest statement issued in the name of the hunger strikers in which they reject the Commission's proposals as an "unacceptable dilution" of their five demands.

5. I do beg of you not to be misled into thinking that this problem is susceptible of any easy solution, wanting only a little flexibility on Her Majesty's Government's part. It is not. The protesters have abandoned their claim for differential treatment, and that is helpful because it was totally unacceptable. But they still, it seems, hold to their five demands. In our attitude to these demands we are not seeking to be difficult for the sake of saving face. We have to grapple not only with a serious problem of prison control but also with issues going to the standing of the Provisionals. Of course the regime could be modified in various ways (as it has been already) and we have consistently maintained that we are prepared - once the hunger strike is over - to make yet further improvements on humanitarian grounds. Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that the aim of the Provisionals (and this is why they see no role for the ICJP) is not merely - or mainly - to get easier prison conditions for their members. It is to achieve within the Northern Ireland prison system a regime, originally for themselves, but now apparently for all prisoners, in which the prisoners and not the prison authorities determine what goes on. If they achieve this, that would confer a kind of legitimacy upon the acts for which those prisoners were convicted. If, in addition, the Provisionals were to be drawn into direct negotiation with the British Government on the terms of settling the hunger strike, that would confer upon them a status which they would value. I am sure that these aims are as unacceptable to us as they would be to you.

6. Furthermore, we are not prepared to subscribe to forms of words which by their generality can mean all things to all men. That course could only lead to subsequent recrimination and to yet a further round of strikes at a later date. We know that you recognise the importance of ensuring that any settlement is a lasting one.

7. I note what you say about co-operation between the British security forces and those of the Republic. As you know, we value that co-operation highly. As I have observed above, terrorism is our common enemy. It recognises no borders. I cannot believe your Government will wish in any way to diminish the scale or intensity of that co-operation. I appreciate the importance of local opinion; but the reaction of public opinion here to any suggestion that the authorities in the Republic were offering less than full co-operation in the detection and apprehension of terrorists

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would be sharp and bitter and there must be a risk that it would have an adverse effect on wider Anglo-Irish relationships.

8. We have of course been considering what further steps are open to us to bring the hunger strike to an end. We have had an offer by the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit Northern Ireland prisons and submit reports on the conditions there. We have now decided to take this offer up, and an announcement to this effect will be made the moment the necessary arrangements can be made. I sincerely hope that the intervention, by agreement, of so highly respected and independent a body as the Red Cross will cause the hunger strikers to end their fast so that the Committee's work can be done without the pressure created by a series of further deaths.