

THE DIRTY PROTEST - MAZE AND ARMAGH PRISONS

There were three strands to the Secretary of State's statement on 26 March:

- (i) no concession on the central issue of special category status
- (ii) no special category for persons charged on or after 1 April 1980, irrespective of the date of the offence
- (iii) three new measures in regard to the Maze protesters -
  - (a) two visits a month instead of one,
  - (b) a letter in and out weekly rather than monthly, and
  - (c) daily exercise in PT gear.

2. The Republican prisoners have refused to take up any of the offered changes. The five Loyalists on the clean blanket protest are taking the extra visit and the extra letters; they gave their shoe sizes so that PT shoes could be obtained for them, and while they have not taken exercise yet under the new arrangements the Governor thinks that they may do so later.

3. The women protesters are continuing their version of the dirt campaign. There has been some damage to cell walls and the apertures in the cell-doors. Some if not all this damage was caused by chair legs and the Governor has felt obliged to withdraw the chairs. A programme for cleaning the women's cells has been drawn up but this cannot be put into effect until discussions have taken place with the POA. This will take place as soon as possible - the delay has been on the POA side.

The way forward

4. At the last of the private discussions with the Cardinal and Bishop Daly on 1 April it was suggested that it might be reassuring to them if they were to meet members of the Boards of Visitors of Maze and Armagh prisons. We hope to arrange for this meeting to take place at an early date: the proposal will be particularly welcome to the Armagh Board, who have been deeply upset by the lying propaganda put about by Father Faul and others about the regime at the women's prison.

5. It is difficult to see what more can be done by way of humanitarian gestures at Maze Prison in view of the prisoners' refusal to take up any of the last batch of measures. They seem clearly bent on maintaining their protest action in its present form unless all the ingredients of special category are conceded.
6. The situation at Armagh, where the dirty protest has been going on since early February, is particularly vexing; it is tending to become the main focus of the Provisionals' propaganda campaign. We have tried to avoid any steps likely to harden or consolidate the women's protest, or to give the propagandists any legitimate openings to complain of harsh treatment by the authorities. There has been no increase in the punishments meted out to the women protesters; they are still taking their daily exercise; they can have evening association but because of the nature of their recent behaviour must take it in the association room. Because of this restriction, they refuse to have their association. There is no restriction on the number of letters they can send out or receive.
7. We have considered whether the protesters might be allowed the weekly privilege parcel which is permitted to all conforming women prisoners (these parcels can contain reading material, food, fruit, up to 200 cigarettes and toilet articles). It would, however, be an extraordinary step to restore the privilege parcel a few weeks after the escalation of the protest; both the Governor and the Director of Prison Operations at Headquarters are strongly opposed to this step.
8. We think that the policy for the time being must be to maintain the present regime (apart from the introduction of a regular cleaning programme, which we aim to institute as soon as the arrangements can be agreed with the POA). We shall however keep in close touch with the prison Governor, and shall keep in mind the possibility of allowing the prisoners more freedom of movement during association periods.

PR

9. Sandra Chapman of the Belfast Telegraph visited Armagh on Tuesday 15 April.

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10. There is one further step on the information front which we think might be worth taking <sup>in regard</sup> to the close relatives of the protesting prisoners. In the discussions with the SDLP, and with the Cardinal and the Bishop, much has been made of the anxieties of the parents. They have to rely, for their picture of the conditions in which their sons/daughters are living, on what they hear at visits and what they read in the newspapers. A kind of Republican mythology has developed which the parents may come to believe in wholly or partly.

11. Perhaps a letter from Mr Alison to each of the parents drawing attention to the true facts about the conditions in the parts of the prisons concerned would at least cause the parents to question the mythology. At the same time the terms of the letter could be released to the media: the unusual nature of the communication might well lead to the NIO side of the case getting much more coverage than is given to our periodic denials of the allegations of the black propagandists.

12. The disadvantages of a letter of this kind are that:-

(i) it draws the Minister personally into the fray to a greater extent than previously;

(ii) it will almost certainly goad the other side into further counter-allegations, which would probably have to be countered by the conventional means since the Minister could hardly conduct a running correspondence;

(iii) it may in practice be unrealistic to expect that the Minister's letter, which can say nothing that NIO has not already put out in other statements and, correspondence, will bring about a change in the attitudes of the parents.

13. Nevertheless we think, on the whole, that a letter would be helpful in putting over the true facts to the people most closely concerned and in gaining publicity for the Government's side of the argument. Draft letters to (i) the Maze parents, (ii) parents of the women protesters, are attached.

#### A further Parliamentary statement

14. It seems desirable to follow up the statement of 26 March with a further statement about the non-acceptance of the measures previously announced. This should be helpful as a means of publicising the intransigence of the prisoners concerned. At the same time we could say that the Minister is writing to the next-of-kin of all the protesting prisoners explaining the conditions in the parts of the prisons concerned and the facilities which are available to the prisoners.

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15. A suggested draft Question and Answer are attached.

April 1980

## QUESTION

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the response of the prisoners protesting against the refusal of special category status to the further humanitarian measures which he announced on 26 March.

## DRAFT REPLY

I believe that some of the parents of the prisoners concerned may have been misled by some of the reports which have appeared in the press about the new arrangements. The Minister of State, Mr Alison, has written to the next-of-kin of all the prisoners explaining the additional humanitarian measures.

The prisoners taking part in the "dirty" protest at Maze prison have refused to accept the additional visits or letters, or to take exercise in PT gear. The few prisoners who are protesting only by refusing to wear prison uniform or to work are taking the additional visits and letters, but so far have not taken exercise.