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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND,
THE RT HON JAMES PRIOR MP

1. The hunger strike has ended, as it began, by the voluntary action of the protesters. It is time to heal the deep wounds and fresh divisions caused by the strike both inside and outside the prisons, and help to bring to an end the violence which for so long had prevented the social, political and economic development of Northern Ireland.
2. On October 2 I said that I would be making a statement about the development of the prison system. Both my predecessor and I were always determined to be reasonable and flexible and to seek improvements where they could be made. We also made it clear that we would not act under duress. Until now, the hunger strike made movement impossible. Now it is over, I want to play my part in seeking reconciliation and an end to violence by introducing changes along the lines set out by my predecessor on 30 June and 8 July.
3. I must make it quite clear what I am not prepared to do. The protesters' views on work and association are not compatible with a civil prison system, especially the modern and humane system which makes the principal jails of the Province as advanced as any in the world. There is room for development here as elsewhere. But there will be no question of a political or military system of administration or any return to special category status.
4. I have decided to make the following important changes now. They will apply to all prisoners in all prisons in Northern Ireland.

CLOTHES

→ X
5. Prisoners will in future be able to wear their own clothing at all times ^{as of right}. To avoid any misunderstandings, the practical arrangements for this change will be set out in a leaflet which Lord Gowrie will circulate to prisoners tomorrow. These arrangements cover for example the need to ensure that clothing worn by prisoners does not resemble that of Prison Officers, is not tantamount to a uniform, and is not offensive or unsuitable so as to be an abuse of the privilege. We also need to specify the quantities of clothing and finalise laundry arrangements. These are practical matters and need cause no serious problems. The change will take perhaps two or three weeks to complete. Families may bring clothes to the prisons when they have been informed of the details in the leaflets. Of course, those who prefer to continue to wear the prison issue civilian-style clothing will be able to do so.

/REMISSION

REMISSION

6. At present prisoners who have lost remission as a penalty for certain protest action may have 20% of that lost remission restored after three months of full conformity with prisons rules. A number of prisoners have already gained from this. I am now introducing a more generous scheme for restoration of lost remission. Lord Gowrie will make full details be known, shortly, based on the following principles:-

(i) The new scheme will extend to all prisoners who have lost remission other than as a result of violent acts against Prison Officers or other prisoners;

(ii) The amount of lost remission which may be restored will be increased to a maximum of 50%, i.e. those who have already qualified for the earlier 20% restoration will gain a further 30%, and those who newly qualify will gain the full 50%;

(iii) The new scheme, like the present one, will apply only after a period of three months' conformity with prison rules.

→ + { However as a gesture of goodwill I am prepared, exceptionally, to ensure that the first eligible prisoners can be home by Christmas.

The new scheme applies to past behaviour. It does not mean that prisoners who in the future lose remission for breaches of prison rules will have lost remission restored.

ASSOCIATION

7. Conforming prisoners already have many opportunities for mixing with one another at mealtimes, work, exercise, and during their periods of association each evening and at weekends. There is little immediate scope for expansion here but I have accepted that there should be some provision for prisoners in adjacent wings of H-Blocks to share association in recreation rooms and exercise areas. Before this change can be implemented new arrangements for the control and supervision of such movement and certain additional physical changes will be required. These will take some weeks.

8. The Government has made it clear that the development of a prison system is a continual process; in particular that the possibility of widening the scope of work in the prisons can be examined within certain well-defined limits. There are obvious practical and financial limitations on what can be arranged. Here I should like to pay tribute to prison officials for successfully maintaining an enlightened system for conforming prisoners while coping with the great stress and strain occasioned by the protest. I am very conscious that many, indeed most of the prisoners, are young men. Even in the context of deservedly long sentences on conviction of violent crimes many of them will, in the normal way, be released before they ^{are} middle aged. I do therefore want to encourage a system where the very advanced training and educational facilities available, which have much impressed me, may be freely used by all prisoners. Lord Gowrie will continue to keep a close eye on developments in this field as the new arrangements settle down.

9. The changes which I am announcing will take some time to work through. I hope that as they come into effect, protesting prisoners will recognise the benefits of conformity with the rules, and the penalties which exist for those who break them. In order to create a breathing-space and ease the change-over in the prison system, for 28 days from yesterday no loss of remission will be imposed as a penalty for breaches of prison rules arising out of the refusal to wear clothes.

10. I hope that the end of the hunger strike, together with the measures I have described above, will help end the confrontation which has caused so much tragedy and suffering inside and outside the prisons. We must never forget that while ten young men have died tragically in the Maze, many more people have died during the period of the strike as innocent victims of the violence outside. Our task is to stop the men who are causing that violence, so that we can turn all our energies to creating a better future for all the people of Northern Ireland. I want to get on with this task and I have made it clear that my priority will be to tackle our economic difficulties. In the spirit of reconciliation with which I have put forward my prison reforms I look for co-operation and support in this wide purpose from all the leaders of the community.

6 October 1981