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From the Bishop of Down + Connor

24th. July 1984

James Prior, Esq., M.P.,  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,  
Northern Ireland Office,  
Stormont Castle,  
BELFAST BT4 3ST.

Dear Mr. Prior,

I am moved by a sense of real concern and urgency to write to you again about the situation at the Maze Prison.

I profoundly regret that the decision has been taken and communicated to the prisoners to introduce a regime of "closed visits only" for a selected number of prisoners. I must express the gravest concern about the repercussions of this decision for internal relationships between staff and prisoners within the prison, for relations between prisoners and their families, for agitation in the wider community, for exploitation of the new situation by subversive organisations, and even for security itself, whether within or outside the prison.

I am informed that almost certainly the prisoners affected will refuse to accept any visits from their families. Long-term imprisonment (and the prisoners affected by the closed visits regime are long-sentence prisoners) in itself creates serious strain in marriages and families. If visits are terminated, albeit by the decision of the prisoners themselves, all personal communication between prisoners and their wives and children will be broken off for long periods. The tension among the prisoners will reach dangerous levels and the suffering of their families will greatly increase.

In my earlier letter, I pointed out that closed visits, even if they were accepted by prisoners, would cause more frustration than comfort to both prisoners and their families. The conditions of such visits would frustrate husbands and fathers of their strong human impulse and need to hold their children in their arms, embrace their wives or mothers, etc. I am as appalled as any man could be at the inhuman and infamous deeds which prisoners and their organisations have committed. But I do not wish to see situations develop where new motivations are created for new outrages to be perpetrated by the ruthless organisations to which these men belong.

From a good deal of personal experience, I know that the families of many of the prisoners were utterly shocked to find that members of their own families were involved in paramilitary organisations, and are totally opposed to violence. The influence of these families is one of our best hopes of weaning their relatives and friends in prison away from violence. This was amply proven during the hunger strike crisis. It will be remembered that several prisoners came off, or were taken off, the hunger strike through intervention of their parents or wives. Dreadful though the crimes committed by prisoners are, their families must not be presumed to be culpable. But families will suffer from the closed visits regime as much as, if not more than, the prisoners themselves.

I know that security within the prison is a paramount imperative, which must take precedence over other considerations. But measures taken in the name of security can be self-defeating. Unless there is a minimum of human relationship between prisoners and staff, life within the prison becomes intolerable for both, and the resulting tensions increase the security risks.

I should, in any case, have thought that long-sentence prisoners were on the whole less likely to attempt to smuggle in dangerous materials through their own families. They would surely be much more likely to try to use less suspect means of doing so. Since the prisoners on the closed visits list live in the same blocks with other prisoners, who are all of them by definition 'security risks', and associate with these other prisoners, the security advantage of selecting them out from among the others for this special restriction seems to me extremely questionable.

One wonders also what kind of objective criteria can be established, whereby distinctions can be made on security-risk grounds between prisoners, all of whom are subjected to an otherwise identical regime within the same blocks in the same prison.

Furthermore, some of those on the closed visit list would seem to be prisoners who have been making an effort to respect the prison system and to be of good behaviour. Their efforts will now seem to have been in vain, and the motivation to good behaviour will be removed.

The political consequences of the present prison situation are potentially disastrous. We could easily be put back into a situation like the hunger strike crisis - and the political repercussions of that crisis still dominate the political scene in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the possibility of another actual hunger strike cannot be ruled out. Tragically, neither can the possibility of another ruthless campaign of assassinations of prison staffs and even of their families.

Furthermore, Sinn Fein, as you so well know, depends on agitational politics for its success. What Sinn Fein need and desire more than anything else, in this lead-up to the local council elections, is a platform for agitation. They will welcome a prison crisis and will exploit it gleefully and effectively to their own sinister advantage.

I am personally extremely disturbed at this prospect. Sinn Fein and the IRSP are at present beginning to lose some of their credibility within their political constituencies, because of the inherent contradictions between the "ballot box" and "armalite" arms of their strategy. Their "punishment executions" and "punishment shootings", are causing revulsion among some former supporters and are giving people a new courage in opposing them. I believe that we are, slowly but progressively, beginning to win the battle for non-violence against paramilitary organisations and their political fronts. All the progress gained may now be reversed.

The political dangers of the new prison policy are not going to be lessened, but increased, by the fact that loyalist prisoners are affected as well as republican prisoners. An unholy alliance between these two blood-stained groups is a prospect to be dreaded.

It is worthy of note that even Hennessy (4.13) points to the "humanitarian arguments against closed visits" and expresses the view that "their introduction might well provoke serious and widespread repercussions (so that) the measure could prove to be counter-productive". Here in Northern Ireland prison policies have political implications and repercussions which are not experienced elsewhere. These can never be ignored.

I wish to say in conclusion that, in my opinion, you understand the political complexities of Northern Ireland better than any previous Secretary of State. That is why I write to you once more to ask you please to give this matter your personal attention, and to do so before the crisis becomes public and reversal of the decision becomes much more difficult.

With my kind personal regards,

Yours very sincerely,

+ Cahal B. Daly.