

# British government views on the hunger strikes

‘If Mr Sands persisted in his wish to commit suicide, that was his choice. The Government would not force medical treatment on him.’

*Humphrey Atkins, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland*

On 5 May, Sands died in the prison hospital on the sixty-sixth day of his hunger strike, prompting several days of riots in nationalist areas of Northern Ireland.

Humphrey Atkins issued a statement saying he had committed suicide ‘under the instructions of those who felt it useful to their cause that he should die’.

Margaret Thatcher showed no sign of regret for his death, telling the House of Commons that ‘Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organisation did not allow to many of its victims’.

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MARGARET THATCHER, Prime Minister: ‘There can be no question of political status for someone who is serving a sentence for crime. Crime is crime is crime. It is not political, it is crime.’

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LORD PRIOR, Northern Ireland Secretary, 1974-76: ‘She was very tough on the hunger strike. She thought that if she gave way on it, that this would have a very large impact on both the Protestant population, as well as on the IRA, and therefore she was determined that if this was the way they were going to proceed, it had to continue.’

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## More views

The government view is that if they (striking prisoners) wish to die, then they had better get on with it. It’s a standoff. If somebody dies, there will be a limited degree of disorder, but we think we are prepared for it. By and large, it (the hunger strike) is a test of nerve, and I think we (the British government) have enough nerve.

High ranking government official in Belfast, *Chicago Tribune*, 3 March 1981

[Sands’ hunger strike will] cause no change of policy on political status. The government has made it clear on a number of occasions the principles by which it is guided.

Spokesman for British government in Northern Ireland, *Chicago Tribune*, 12 April 1981

**Crime is crime is crime.**

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher

**It is not my habit or custom to meet members of parliament from a foreign country to talk about a citizen of the United Kingdom resident in the United Kingdom."**

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on refusing to meet with Irish Prime Minister Charles Haughey, *Chicago Tribune*, 22 April 1981

**It’s not Bobby Sands really. He just puts the focus on the real problem. Whatever we’ve been doing the past 12 years, we’ve arrived at a point at which Catholics and Protestants are further apart than ever."**

Senior British official, *Washington Post*, 4 May 1981

**Mr Robert Sands, a prisoner in the Maze Prison, died today at 01.17. He took his own life by refusing food and medical intervention for 66 days.**

Northern Ireland Office, *Daily News*, 5 May 1981

**I regret Sands’ death. Too many have died in Northern Ireland. His death was self-inflicted.**

Humphrey Atkins, Northern Ireland Secretary, *Washington Post*, 5 May 1981

I regret this needless and pointless death. Too many have died by violence in Northern Ireland. In this case it was self-inflicted. We should not forget others who have died, two of them in the last few days by violence inflicted by others. It is my profound hope and prayer that the people of Northern Ireland will recognize the futility of violence and turn their faces away from it.

Humphrey Atkins, Northern Ireland Secretary, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 May 1981

We shall continue in our efforts to stamp out terrorism. Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice his organization did not give to many of their victims.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, *Washington Post*, 6 May 1981

'The hunger strike' 'has become a major embarrassment around the world.

British government official speaking for the British Foreign Office, *Washington Post*, 16 July 1981

The government sees no justification for giving prisoners in Northern Ireland a substantially different regimen' from those imprisoned elsewhere in Britain.

Northern Ireland Secretary Humphrey Atkins, after death of Thomas McElwee, *Washington Post*, 9 August 1981

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in a letter yesterday to four U.S. critics of Britain's Northern Ireland policy, said blame for the hunger-strike deaths rests with those who order' 'these young men to commit suicide.

Thatcher said: 'We have facilitated the efforts of the Pope's personal representative, the European Commission of Human Rights, the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, and now the International Committee of the Red Cross.'

She said all efforts to end the hunger strike 'have foundered on the intransigent adherence of the prisoners to the five demands which they formulated five years ago and which have not changed in substance to this day.

The hunger strike by jailed Irish nationalists in the Maze Prison may be called off because it is 'placing little or no' pressure on the British government, a spokesman for the prisoners said yesterday."

'IRA May Give Up On Hunger Strike', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 October 1981

Margaret Thatcher] is delighted that the hunger strike has ended. She has been deeply distressed at the loss of young lives inside and outside the prison.

British spokesman at 10 Downing Street, *Washington Post*, 4 October 1981

I and my predecessors have already made clear that further development of the prison regime will be possible once duress is removed.

James Prior, British Secretary for Northern Ireland, *Chicago Tribune*, 4 October 1981

The 10 men who starved themselves to death in a Belfast prison did not go on hunger strike because they wanted to, but because the Irish Republican Army gave them 'no alternative',

If you didn't go on hunger strike when you were told to, you wouldn't last very long, and neither would your family.

Jill Knight, member of British Parliament, *Chicago Tribune*, 7 October 1981