

1979 STATE PAPERS

Priest tried to ease tensions in H Block

THE NIO rejected a request by Redemptorist priest Fr Alec Reid, CSSR of Clonard Monastery in west Belfast, for a meeting with officials to discuss his concerns about the treatment of protesting prisoners in the H Blocks in 1979, according to the state files.

Tipperary-born Fr Reid was to play a key role in the peace process of the early 1990s and witnessed the secret IRA decommissioning in 2005.

The files show that in January 1979 Fr Reid sent a letter to Don Concannon, Northern Ireland prisons minister through the West Belfast MP, Gerry Fitt.

The priest made a number of suggestions for easing tensions in the Maze.

In a further letter to the minister on January 29 1979, the Clonard priest expressed regret that Mr Concannon had rejected his proposals but was grateful for the minister's understanding of his concerns as a priest about the situation in the H Blocks.

"My work brings me into constant contact with the situation on the ground, with the thoughts and feelings that are motivating people's attitudes and with the sufferings and anxieties of the prisoners' relatives," Fr Reid said.



■ **REJECTED PROPOSALS:** Former prisons minister Don Concannon

"I feel, therefore, a responsibility to do all I can... to alleviate the situation and to lessen tensions..."

The Clonard priest told Mr Concannon that he was not happy with the minister's recent comments regarding his suggestions on "the wearing of prison overalls during working hours"

and his suggestions on prison work facilities.

Consequently, the priest requested a meeting with officials "to discuss ways and means of alleviating the situation in the prison", including the reduction

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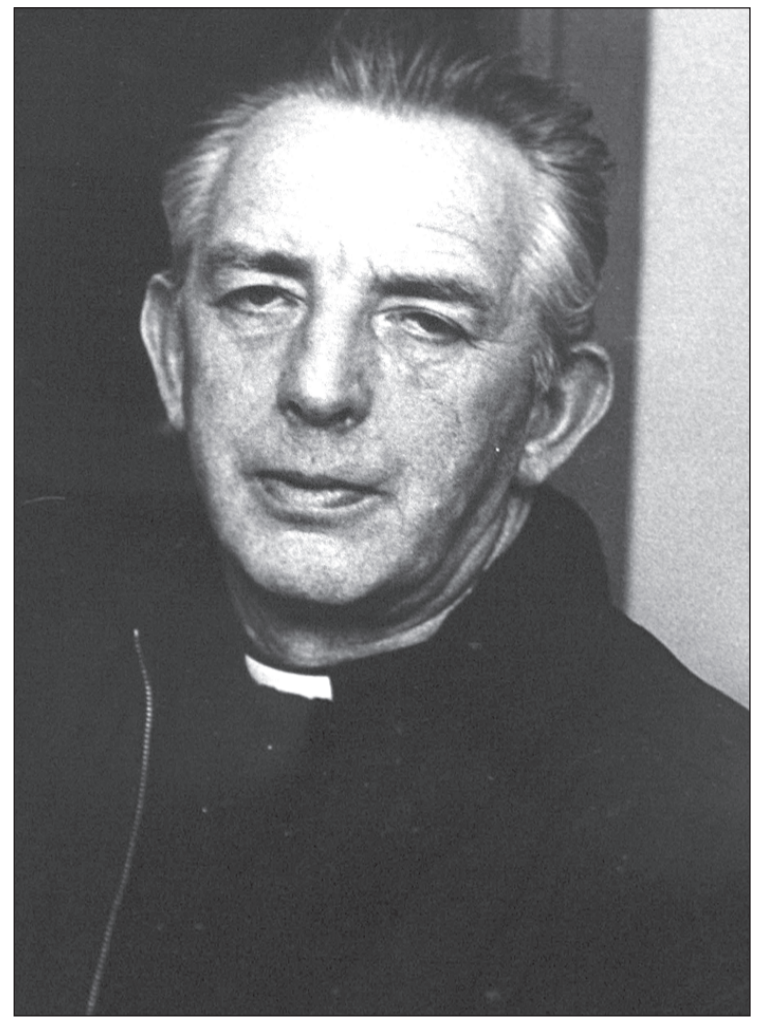
Fr Alec Reid

of tensions between the authorities and the prisoners.

Fr Reid stated that he wished to be accompanied by "a colleague of mine who would be acceptable to you".

In a marginal comment on Fr Reid's letter, an official wrote: "Des Wilson", followed by an exclamation mark.

This was a reference to the well known west Belfast priest Fr Desmond Wilson.



■ **MADE SUGGESTIONS:** Fr Alec Reid worked to change prison work facilities

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