

Thatcher overruled minister to keep Moors murderers locked up for life

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 Myra Hindley and Ian Brady. Photograph: Greater Manchester police/PA

Letter released by National Archives reveals PM disagreed with her home secretary's advice on parole for Myra Hindley and Ian Brady

Margaret Thatcher intervened to overrule the home secretary and ensure that the Moors murderers, Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, were never released from prison, Downing Street papers have revealed.

Thatcher told Leon Brittan in February 1985 that his proposed minimum sentences of 30 years for Hindley and 40 years for Brady were too short.

"I do not think that either of these prisoners should ever be released from custody. Their crime was the most hideous and cruel in modern times," she wrote on Brittan's proposal.

Hindley and Brady had already been behind bars for 19 years when Brittan decided to set in train the first formal reviews by the parole board of their release prospects.



📷 Margaret Thatcher with Leon Brittan at No 10 Downing Street. Photograph: PA

“At present I have in mind a tariff of 30 years for Hindley and 40 years for Brady, implying that after 1992 and 2002 respectively the question of release (in 1995 and 2005 at the earliest) will be determined on risk grounds rather than on grounds of retribution and deterrence,” Brittan told Thatcher in a letter in the Downing Street file released by the National Archives on Thursday.

“I do not intend to announce this publicly and must keep options open, but, in accordance with usual practice, the Parole Board will be told in confidence of my views.”

It had previously been thought that successive home secretaries had agreed with the trial judge that Brady should remain behind bars until he died. In November 1985, Brady was diagnosed as a psychopath and transferred to Park hospital, Sefton – later renamed Ashworth hospital – where he died on 15 May this year.

Hindley was initially told she would spend a minimum of 25 years in prison before being considered for parole. Brittan’s decision in 1985 increased it to 30 years, though it appears that in her case, Thatcher’s intervention did not take immediate effect. A “whole life” tariff, as it is now called, was imposed by a later Conservative home secretary, David Waddington, in 1990, but Hindley was not told of the decision until 1994.

A series of legal challenges led to a final ruling in 2002 by the House of Lords – then the highest appeal court in England and Wales – that judges, not politicians, should decide how long convicted criminals should remain in prison. The ruling came too late for Hindley, who had died in Highpoint prison, Suffolk, 10 days earlier.