

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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CONFIDENTIAL

Meeting with Northern Ireland officials, Stormont,
17th November, 1980.

Notes:

Present for all or part of the meeting were:-

Sir Kenneth Stowe (Secretary, Northern Ireland Office)
Mr. Michael Moriarty (Deputy Secretary, N.I.O.),
Leonard Figg, (British Ambassador),
Mr. Ewart Bell (Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service),
Mr. Ken Bloomfield, (Secretary, Department of the Environment)
Mr. Jack Hermonn (Chief Constable),
Mr. Brook Richards (Security Co-ordinator),
Mr. Norman Dugdale (Secretary, Department of Health and Welfare),
Mr. Brian Palmer (Central Secretariat),
Messrs. Wyatt, Belloch, and Burns, (Northern Ireland Office),
Messrs. O'Rourke, Nelligan, Kirwan and Nally, on the Irish side.

Some of the main points on the items discussed were:-

H-Block:

- There was no particular cause for concern, at present, after three weeks of the strike, so far as the individual prisoners were concerned;
- other prisoners had started on a dirty protest in support of the hunger strikers but some had since come off it;
- they expected that, in normal circumstances, deterioration would set in after about 60-100 days but this type of forecast was unreliable in present circumstances because of all the variables;
- the situation in the Community was better than they would have expected it to be, after three weeks of the strike; there was widespread support in both communities for the stand the Government was taking. The demonstration in Belfast had been attended by about 10,000 people and was peaceful. There had been a further demonstration in Coalisland attended by about 6,000 people, which had been more of a "rent a crowd" nature. There were dangers that the provisional I.R.A. seeing that the hunger strike, which was their last weapon was not gaining the support they had expected, in both communities, would resort to provocation and this could be extremely dangerous. In 1969 the police had faced the Catholic community; in 1974 they had faced the Protestant community; in the Paisley strike later in the decade, they had again faced the Protestant population; on each occasion only one community was involved; on this occasion, if things went wrong, they would have to face both communities and this was a prospect they did not relish;
- the Government would not and could not concede political status but would continue to sustain and improve the prison regime, which was unique, and perhaps among the most advanced in Europe. One outcome they could see was that the strikers would agree to call off the protest while certain courses, to be defined, were pursued. The

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British representatives thought mediation premature at this stage and, that it could be counter-productive in that it could weaken the support in the communities which they now undoubtedly had. The I.R.A. were very nervous about the outcome of the strike and should not be encouraged in any way to believe that political status was a possibility;

- The British have their own sources of information on the prisoners attitudes and will continue to develop them. They would welcome statements of support, on the lines which they had been getting from leaders in both communities recently, which they saw as weakening the morale of the protestors and bringing them to the realisation that political status just was not on.

GENERAL SECURITY:

- More offenders were being caught than ever before;
- The level of violence was lower;
- Violent men were becoming more isolated in both communities;
- The switch from military to police enforcement was continuing and gathering pace;
- Co-operation with the South is satisfactory and effective.

ECONOMIC ISSUES:

- Unemployment in Northern Ireland is 15%, on average, and more than double this in some areas;
- Current budget difficulties were requiring a switch of funds from welfare and health to productive and infrastructural services;
- There was co-operation or consultation, with the South, on Energy, Housing and Fisheries, which was satisfactory;
- Close consultation would be maintained with the South on the case to Brussels for non-quota regional funds;
- The level of expectation from these and other Brussels funds was, perhaps, unduly high.

MEETING BETWEEN THE TAOISEACH AND PRIME MINISTER:

- The British side reviewed progress on the devolution talks. Their predominant concern, in whatever was said or done is that -
"We must not make the security position worse.";
- There would be no clear statement of future policy before the end of the year. The course had to be worked out, in London, and taking into account the Taoiseach's views. Whatever was done in Northern Ireland, they would have to be sensitive to the totality of all the relationships between the two islands and the parts thereof;

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- At some point the transfer of powers of Government back to an elected Assembly would, on all the probabilities, have had to be part of the process;
- We must always bear in mind that there was a large body of opinion in Northern Ireland which would resist very forcibly even the idea of imposed new relationships;
- There would be tension in the local communities in Northern Ireland up to next May, when local elections were due to be held. This tension would be exploited to the full in the struggle between Molyneaux and Paisley for whose parties the elections would be a deadly struggle for power;
- What we were concerned with was peace and stability in Ireland, especially Northern Ireland and improving relations between the two islands. This must be the theme of the forthcoming meeting;
- On the question of a future conference this could take any one of four forms -
 - (1) there could be an overt and specific reference to a conference;
 - (2) the reference could be to a special meeting in the present series designed to discuss the issues at stake;
 - (3) the meeting could be described as the next meeting in the series, which would be specially devoted to.....; and
 - (4) the communique could say that "at our next meeting in this series, we will discuss....."; the question of participation by both parts of the community in Northern Ireland would need special consideration. The Unionist community would and could exploit the situation to the detriment of everybody;
- The substance of the conference could be concerned with political, economic, social, security and other relationships between the different parts of these islands and could, ^{being} be described as to undertake a fundamental re-examination of these aspects with a view to the progressive weakening of old animosities;
- it was extremely important in any language not to commit the two leaders to final conclusions by say May or June, or even to a conference which would give rise to final conclusions. Essentially more could be achieved by stages than in any other way;
- the Conference, however ^{it} was described, could be concerned with Energy, citizenship, new institutional structures, as well as political and financial relationships;
- There should be a further meeting, if possible, before the European Council in Luxembourg, at official level to iron out communique wording.