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NOTE

The Minister for Foreign Affairs received this morning at their request Miss Sile de Valera, T.D. M.E.P., Mr. Neil Blaney, T.D. M.E.P., and Dr. John O'Connell T.D. M.E.P.

At the outset the Minister said that he had decided to respond as quickly as possible to their request for a meeting. He undertook to convey what they wished to say to him to the Government for their information.

Mr. Blaney said that each of them wished to convey their impressions of the situation and their ideas on how the impasse could be broken. He said that we all knew how the present situation came about. What was starkly clear was that what was needed was a willingness on the part of the British Government to avoid a blow up in Northern Ireland. The climate was "tender" and while the Sands situation could continue for two or six or ten or even twelve days, it could develop into a conflagration. What he would like to bring to attention was how the matter could be resolved. Deputy Blaney then went on to refer to the five hundred prisoners in Long Kesh who are enjoying privileges. In addition to these, he said, there are in British prisons Irish prisoners who have the conditions which are being demanded by Sands. In Portlaoise, also, he said, conditions were as little as makes no difference equal to what Sands wants. Deputy Blaney went on to say that Sands is not seeking by name "political status". At the close of their conversation with him he had remarked that he had never mentioned political status. Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Atkins were harping on political status. It did not matter what it was called, political status or special category but there was an irrefutable case why Sands should get what the pre-1976 prisoners have, what the Irish prisoners in Britain have and what they have "down here". The British also asked how could they be sure the prisoners would not ask for more. The answer to this is that the British have the prisoners inside the jail and can control them - they can if necessary take concessions back. The prisoners however need to have concessions delivered to them. It had looked in December as if they would go to the end; they had given up and now felt welshed upon. Deputy Blaney said that his impression is that there are many more prisoners ready to go on hunger strike - up to twenty more, who are very determined.

Deputy O'Connell said that he did not know why he had been asked to visit the prison. He did not believe that anyone should die for a principle. He did however feel strongly about the position of prisoners. He felt that loss of freedom was enough. He had found Sands remarkably strong but other doctors he had met in the prison were very fearful and felt that he had six days at most to live. Deputy O'Connell then referred to the consequences in Northern Ireland of the death of Sands and the possibility of a spill over in the South. He said Mrs. Thatcher's intransigence is impressive but that there was a formula which could get the British off the hook by concessions in the field of work and other areas. He referred to the fact that there is no trouble at present in Portlaoise. He went on to say that if something could be done, possibly behind the scenes, he and his colleagues would withdraw immediately. They would be delighted if the Government could solve the problem. He went on to say that in his view there was little public sympathy for the hunger strikers but if a solution were reached there would be great national relief. If the Government intervened - even if

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it failed - the effect would be good. If the Government did not intervene, it would be condemned.

Deputy Blaney intervened to say that it should be recognised that the vote in Fermanagh/South Tyrone and the reaction to the hunger strike reflect deep national conditions. He agreed with a comment Deputy O'Connell had made that the reaction in British newspapers regarding the activities of the three M.E.P.'s had been very critical and added that the press comment was a reaction to the squeeze on them by world wide publicity.

Miss de Valera said she agreed with what the other two M.E.P.'s had said. The question of political status was being used as an excuse for not giving in; there was a way out and this would not involve any question of principle.

Deputy O'Connell said that Sands had said that free association would be in the interests of the prison authorities in that it would help to keep the different factions apart.

Miss de Valera and Deputy Blaney made a point that there had been no reaction from Unionists after the visit to Long Kesh and they interpreted this as indicating a Unionist interest in improvement of the present prison conditions.

Deputy Blaney said that he had been active in contacting the Commission of Human Rights, the Reagan administration and others in America and that he had put down a resolution for debate at the next session of the European Parliament which begins on 6 May. He said that interest is wide among M.E.P.'s. All of this he said would add to the international publicity. Miss de Valera added that she was aware of tremendous interest in the Netherlands, France, Canada etc.

The Minister thanked the M.E.P.'s for the information they had given. He said he was glad to be filled in on the situation and brought up to date. He would convey this information to the Government, which would proceed from there as a Government. He would do this immediately.

Deputy Blaney said that timing is important - it would be a tragedy if Sands died even while progress was being made.

There was then some discussion about Sands' background and the offence for which he was convicted.

Deputy Blaney suggested that what should be said outside was that the three M.E.P.'s had been bringing the Minister up to date on the situation.

The meeting then terminated.

Following the meeting ^a the press release (copy attached) was issued.



Secretary
22 April 1981

cc Mr. Hally
Mr. Heligan
Mr. Brabie
Ambassador London