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OPERATION "PEACE LINE"

Narrative of Events

On Friday, 5 September, when I was in London, there was a meeting of the Joint Security Committee at which the Prime Minister and other Northern Ireland Ministers and General Freeland were present, and at which it was stated that there was an urgent need to remove the barricades and restore law and order throughout Belfast. Otherwise it was implied, the Government would be unable to contain their more extremist elements. General Freeland managed to contain the situation over most of the weekend; but on Sunday evening, 7 September, there was the unfortunate tear gas incident in Percy Street.

2. At the meeting of the Joint Security Committee on 8 September, which was attended in considerable strength by Northern Ireland Ministers, the demand was again put forward. It was stated on the Northern Ireland side that if nothing were done, the Government would be open to accusations of allowing the situation to drift and of not taking charge of events. Opinion was polarising and unless some visible sign was seen that the Catholic barricades were coming down, the Protestant extremists would put more barricades up. General Freeland agreed that action should be taken and undertook to present to a meeting of the Joint Security Committee on the following day a plan for the restoration of law and order throughout Belfast. Tentatively, he suggested that the plan should comprise three main ingredients :-

- a modified curfew, not to be called a curfew but a 'prohibition of vehicular traffic';
- a programme to start the gradual dismantlement of the barricades;
- and a "peace line" to act as a sort of cordon sanitaire between the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill area.

This was agreed to, and the Prime Minister announced his intention of going on television to give details of what was proposed and also to pledge himself to the programme of reforms.

... / 3. At 3 p.m.

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3. At 3 p.m. on 9 September, the Prime Minister went down to Broadcasting House to record his television interview, having previously cleared the general line of it with the General Officer Commanding. At 4 o'clock, the Prime Minister attended a meeting of the Joint Security Committee, together with other Northern Ireland Ministers, the General Officer Commanding and myself, to hear the General's exposition of his plan and to tidy up the details. The plan was approved and it was agreed that measures should be at once taken to contact all the senior leaders of the church communities in order to explain the plan to them and enlist their co-operation. It was agreed that the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Porter, should see the Protestant leaders and that I should have a word on the telephone with Cardinal Conway.

4. The meeting ended at 5 o'clock and I went to my office to ring Cardinal Conway. As I entered the door, the telephone rang and Father Murphy was at the other end. He was in a highly excitable and voluble state of mind. He said that he had just heard not only that the Prime Minister was to broadcast at 6 o'clock that evening, but that he was going to threaten to pull down the barricades : he had seen what the Prime Minister was going to say. He wanted to make it perfectly clear to me, as the Home Secretary's representative and plenipotentiary, that the Catholic community would regard this statement, if made, as a "declaration of war" and that it amounted to a "strategic decision to change the course of the war" which was quite at variance with all the assurances given to the Catholic Community by the Home Secretary during his visit. To proceed was madness and he could not be responsible for the consequences. His request was that I should use my good offices to cancel the broadcast so that the whole plan could be discussed the following day and the barricades continue to be removed by the processes of negotiation.

5. I told Father Murphy that I hoped, when he heard the broadcast, he would be convinced that the sole object of this exercise was to bring peace and a sense of security to all communities. Neither I nor the General Officer Commanding would lend ourselves to an operation which placed the Catholic Community in jeopardy. Father Murphy was not to be assuaged. In all, I got an ear bashing for about 25 minutes, a fact which would have prevented me from carrying out Father Murphy's wishes even if I had been minded to do so.

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After 25 minutes and a vain effort to calm him down, I said that I was unable to give him the main assurance he sought, namely that the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland would not make his broadcast, but that I could give him an assurance that no barricade would be removed without the General Officer Commanding taking every possible precaution to ensure that the safety, the lives and the property of the Catholic community were placed at no risk whatsoever. He rang off.

6. Within seconds, his Bishop, Bishop Philbin, was on the telephone. He repeated what Father Murphy had said about a "declaration of war" in slightly less emotional terms, and called upon me with considerable vehemence and urgency to get the broadcast stopped. I asked him to leave a corner of his mind open to the possibility that the broadcast would not in fact say what he feared it might say. I pointed out that the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland was pledging himself personally to the execution of all the reforms agreed upon during the Home Secretary's visit. I said that the motivation of the whole exercise in my mind and that of the General Officer Commanding was to promote law, order and justice in Northern Ireland and to ensure the safety of all the people in Belfast and of the Catholic community in particular. I said that the peace line would act as a barrier to protect the vulnerable Catholic community against all forms of violence. I read out to him extracts from the broadcast indicating that it was the policy of the Government and of the G.O.C. to proceed gradually, to seek to remove the barricades voluntarily if possible and to tackle the less sensitive areas first, leaving the more sensitive areas in the centre of Belfast for later. Bishop Philbin was unimpressed. He then proceeded to read out to me a letter which he had just written to me which forecast in the direst terms the probable consequences of the Northern Ireland Government's policy, if proceeded in, and said that I would be responsible if nothing happened to prevent this tragedy. I said I would certainly report what he had told me, but that I could not give him the assurances he sought.

7. By this time it was approximately 5.40 p.m. and the Prime Minister had asked to see me. I then spent the next quarter-of-an-hour with Major Chichester-Clark reporting on this Catholic reaction. I did not suggest to the Prime Minister that he might call the BBC and cancel his broadcast, since it was quite clear that this could only have even more disastrous results. We agreed that there was nothing to do but wait on events and trust to the

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way in which the military operated to re-establish confidence in the bona fides of the whole operation. We then cleared a possible draft of what the Home Secretary might say in support of the Northern Ireland Government's position on the Cameron Report, and I returned to my office where Major-General Dyball was waiting for me to discuss the general situation.

8. I got to my office at 5.55 and found Cardinal Conway on the line. The Cardinal had clearly had a briefing from Bishop Philbin and Father Murphy, but was in a much less emotional state than either of them. He expressed his dismay that he had not been consulted in advance and that the general machinery of consultation seemed to have broken down. He felt it necessary to register a formal protest with me. I again expressed regret that he should have heard in a roundabout way a garbled version of what the Prime Minister intended to say. I hoped that, when he saw the Prime Minister's broadcast, he would not think so harshly of it as his Bishop and Father Murphy did. I expressed regret that the normal lines of communication seemed to have broken down, but said that I had come from a meeting of the Joint Security Committee specifically to telephone him to put him in the picture about what was proposed, but instead had been treated to a 25-minute ear bashing by Father Murphy. We had a quiet joke together about Father Murphy. We parted with expressions of regret.

9. I then went to General Freeland's private residence to tell him what had happened and to give him my general view of the deteriorating political environment in which he had to conduct his security operations. We had a long talk about his tactical plans for putting the following day's operations into effect. He suggested that I keep the Governor of Northern Ireland, Lord Grey, in the picture. I returned to my office at the Hotel Conway just before 8 o'clock to receive a message that Cardinal Conway wished to speak to me again.

10. At 8 o'clock I tried to ring the Cardinal, but his line was engaged. I rang the Governor and put him in the picture. At 8.25 I rang the Cardinal again and got through to him. By this time, he had seen the Prime Minister's broadcast and was much less het up about the whole situation. I again expressed regret that he had found out what was proposed in this roundabout way. He asked whether we could meet again soon. I said certainly : would he prefer this evening or would tomorrow morning do ? He thought tomorrow morning would do. I said that I had just come from the General and that I could give him the most explicit assurances that no

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barricades would be removed without full protection being given to all the citizens concerned. There was no intention at all on the part of the military to start a crash programme at dead of night. The first thing that would happen tomorrow morning, would be the erection of the peace line between the Falls Road area and the Shankill area. The Cardinal expressed pleasure at this. He called it a sound plan and regarded it as a very valuable addition to the protection of his community. I said the next action would be the imposition of a prohibition on the movement of vehicular traffic, with certain exceptions, at 9 o'clock the following evening. This would be in force between the hours of 9 p.m. and six a.m. and should, I thought, be a source of considerable protection to his community. Finally the military would move towards the removal of barricades. It was the intention, and the Prime Minister had made this clear in his broadcast, that we would seek to remove these barricades voluntarily and by consent, but they had to come down. Moreover the General intended to start on the less sensitive areas, still proceeding voluntarily if possible, and only move towards the more sensitive areas as and when confidence was restored and progress could be made. I repeated however that the barricades would have to come down. The Cardinal accepted this and said this was what we all wanted. He seemed to be considerably reassured by this timetable of events and by the account I gave him of the General's tactical plans. He said in view of what I had told him, there would be no need for us to meet that evening, the following day would do. I agreed to present myself at his Palace at Armagh at 10 a.m. on 10 September.

11. Finally, I telephoned the Governor again to tell him how I got on with the Cardinal and also to the G.O.C. to let him know that I had revealed to the Cardinal most of his tactical thinking. General Freeland was perfectly happy with what I had said to the Cardinal. The Governor seemed content too.

12. Father Murphy, on Television News at 10 p.m., seemed to have calmed down considerably. He had apparently telephoned No. 10 Downing Street making a couple of points; but with a little bit of luck all this should have been overtaken by events by tomorrow morning.

13. So much for the events of the day. I have left out such peripheral matters as the World Cup Match between Ireland and the Soviet Union, which caused a certain amount of commotion in the middle of the day.

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14. I am quite clear in my own mind that the Northern Ireland Government had to take action, if only to keep its own extremist supporters under control. So long as the Government is in office, it must govern; and, after all, it does govern with the consent of 65% of the population. I am convinced too that the plan of action was sensible and the minimum necessary if the Government was to have a hope of keeping control of the situation. In the circumstances, I think the Prime Minister's broadcast was every bit as good as one could expect in the circumstances. It gave a general air of the smack of firm government. It pledged the Prime Minister personally to see that the reforms were carried out or resign his office. (This is most important since it is clear that one of the purposes of the Protestant extremists' present tactics is to try to make sure that the Government does not get its legislation through Parliament in the autumn.) It laid stress on the fact that the Government were seeking to remove the barricades by consent in the first instance. In all the circumstances, I do not think he could have said more or less.

15. The deplorable part of the whole exercise was the breach of confidence by the television authorities of the Prime Minister's broadcast. It is quite clear that what happened was that, after the Prime Minister had recorded his message, someone in the studios who knew what he had said told someone in the Catholic community what was proposed. This had two unfortunate effects. First it meant that the Cardinal and the hierarchy received the first intimation of the Government's plans not from me in advance of their being put into effect, but by way of rumours and garbled reports. It is impossible to say how doctored the reports that went to the Catholic community from the broadcasting studios were. But from the reaction of Father Murphy and Bishop Philbin, the effect of them was quite deplorable and placed seriously at risk ~~not only~~ the relations between myself, the Army authorities and the Catholic hierarchy. It also threatened to make the situation on the ground worse instead of better and by so doing imperil the whole reform programme.

16. It is quite clear that I could not have acceded to Bishop Philbin's request and asked the Prime Minister to cancel his broadcast. To do so, when so many people knew that he had decided to broadcast, would, at the least, have brought him into disrepute and, at the most, and more likely, led to a loss of authority; and, most probably, resignation. Clearly these were tactics

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on the part of the Catholic community, which although based on genuine fears had nonetheless an element of politicking in them and could not be countenanced.

17. As of now, 11 p.m. on 9 September, it is possible that the situation has at least been contained. Father Murphy's appearance on television at 10 p.m. will have helped to keep things under control and a little earlier there was a gentle rain falling. Amongst other things, what Ulster needs now is the wettest autumn on record.

*A. P. Wilson p.p.*

(Oliver Wright)

(Dictated by Mr. Wright and signed in his absence)

OFFICE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM REPRESENTATIVE  
IN NORTHERN IRELAND,  
9 September, 1969

cc. Mr. Waddell, Home Office  
Sir E. Peck, F.C.O.

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