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COPY NO. 1

NORTHERN IRELAND

NOTE of a Meeting held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1., on  
MONDAY, 15th SEPTEMBER, 1969  
at 5.00 p. m.

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PRESENT

The Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson, MP  
Prime Minister

The Rt. Hon. James Callaghan, MP  
Secretary of State for the Home  
Department

The Rt. Hon. Denis Healey, MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

General Sir Geoffrey Baker,  
Chief of the General Staff

Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Freeland,  
General Officer Commanding,  
Northern Ireland

Mr. J.H. Waddell,  
Home Office

Mr. J.O. Wright,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Sir Burke Trend,  
Secretary of the Cabinet

SECRETARY

Sir Robin Hooper

SUBJECT

NORTHERN IRELAND

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THE PRIME MINISTER expressed his appreciation and that of his colleagues of the services rendered by all those concerned, whether civilian or military, in dealing with an extremely difficult and dangerous situation. He invited the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, General Freeland, to give his appreciation of the situation.

GENERAL FREELAND said that after the visit of the Home Secretary from 27th to 29th August, which had given a major lift to morale in Northern Ireland, he had hoped that the people of Northern Ireland would pull together and make a determined effort to bury the past, get the barricades down, and return to normality. Unfortunately this had not happened and the situation had worsened rather than improved. The reasons for this were difficult to explain but they were based in history and there was deep-rooted fear and suspicion which could not be eradicated by any number of promises. The Roman Catholics had initially welcomed the "new deal" they had been offered: but they were now making demands - for example, for the repeal of the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act, which the Northern Ireland Government could not possibly accept and which he personally regarded as a breach of faith on the part of the Catholics. The question of the Special Powers Act was a difficult one. His own view was that the continued existence of the Act had now become the main Catholic grievance both because of past history and because the Catholics feared that it would be used as the basis for action against them if the barricades came down. His own view was that it would be possible for the Northern Ireland Government to abolish the Act, thus gaining political credit, and replace it by provisions giving them the minimum essential powers they required for the preservation of law and order. He believed that the Catholics would accept this. He had put this to the Northern Ireland Cabinet some time ago: but they had not, at that point, been prepared to face up to the problem, which would involve legislation by Stormont. The heart of the problem in Northern Ireland was constituted by the Catholic areas in Belfast and Londonderry where the writ of the Northern Ireland Government did not run, and which were in effect governed by a Defence Committee in which the moving spirit was one Sullivan with Irish Republican Army (IRA) connections. His aim was to create conditions in which the people behind the barricades would feel sufficiently safe to take down the barricades of their own accord. To this end, the Army had established the so-called "Peace Line" in Belfast dividing the Protestant from the Catholic areas. This was now complete, despite Press reports to the contrary, and was working well, as was the road control system which had operated in the central area of Belfast at night. As a result the situation in that area had improved, though there were still incidents in the areas to the north and south of the central area where Army control was less intensive. Outside the two major cities, the situation was relatively quiet. There was a small military presence in some of the towns such as Enniskillen, Armagh,

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Omagh and Newry, which could be reinforced if necessary: but in general, order was being maintained in the country areas by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), who appeared to be acceptable even in the predominantly Catholic areas. This was however not the case in the Catholic areas of Belfast and Londonderry, where the RUC could not be used. The 'B' Specials of the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC) were now firmly under his command and had to a large extent been reduced to the status of a dormant force. Only about 500 'B' Specials were now active in Belfast and Londonderry and these were employed on duties, e.g. guarding vulnerable points and the docks, which did not bring them into contact with the population. The handing in of the 'B' Specials' firearms had gone well. In Londonderry all arms had been handed in. In Belfast, only 40 weapons out of a total of 600 remained outstanding; and these had been satisfactorily accounted for. The situation in the country areas, where the 'B' Specials were still keeping their arms at home, was more difficult; and there would undoubtedly be an adverse reaction if any attempt were made to impose central control of arms in these areas. Intimidation was still a problem, and a special organisation had been set up to deal with it, manned jointly by the RUC and the Royal Military Police (RMP), with a Home Office civil servant in charge. The organisation was effective in the central areas of the main cities, but incidents occurring outside these areas were more difficult to deal with. The jamming of illegal broadcasting stations was not yet fully effective, but was becoming more so as additional equipment was received and experience was gained. He still thought it inadvisable to move in and close the stations down. In any case, the problem was now less urgent, since the illegal broadcasts had become less inflammatory in tone. So far as the Press and public relations generally were concerned, he had not had too much trouble, though there was a tendency for journalists and others to push their news-gathering activities to the point of interference with operations, and the indiscretions of one newspaper had brought about a major setback in delicate negotiations for the removal of barricades in Belfast.

General Freeland said that he was concerned about the possible effects of the enquiry into police methods and actions which was about to open under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice Scarman, with whom he had already had a two-hour private interview. The enquiry would be taking evidence in open court, and it seemed likely that the allegations which would be made - and, indeed, the facts which would probably be established - would be even more damaging to the public image of the police and the internal morale of the force than those which had emerged from the investigation into the events of last January conducted by Lord Cameron. The proceedings of the enquiry would receive widespread publicity, which was likely to inflame opinion on left and right alike. The enquiry would be taking evidence from 20th September onwards, and the timing was unfortunate in that all this material would come to light before Lord Hunt's report on the reorganisation of the police was ready and any remedial measures had been taken.

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In conclusion, General Freeland said that there had been a certain erosion of the Army's image as an impartial force. This had been inevitable: since the Catholics had been in general on the defensive and the Protestants the attackers, the Army had in many instances been forced into the role of defending the former against the latter. It had therefore been easy for the rabble-rousers on the right wing to misrepresent their actions. The Government of Northern Ireland, however, remained convinced of the Army's impartiality. The fact that the RUC were unacceptable in the Catholic areas of the main cities and that the Army were, to a limited extent, acceptable, had been exploited by right-wing extremists who were trying to drive a wedge between the police and the Army. This, coupled with the fact that the Protestants were tending increasingly to look on the RUC as "their" force, created problems which would need very careful handling. The security situation was being held. The next identifiable danger point might be on the following day when the Reverend Ian Paisley had instructed his sympathisers to "lobby" Stormont. He had been careful not to describe this demonstration as a "march" and there was some doubt whether the Northern Ireland Government would ban it, though they would do so if they had the powers. Although the Army was rapidly learning how best to deploy its limited manpower, the operation was one which was very expensive in troops. Five battalions were now committed in Belfast alone. Although the reports of the stresses to which the troops had been subjected had been exaggerated, the strain was considerable though, by "active service" standards, acceptable. It would increase as winter drew on and conditions deteriorated. Nevertheless, it was essential that the Army should continue to hold the ring until the police could be reorganised, their morale improved, and reforms introduced (in particular a less sectarian composition of the force) which would restore public confidence. The job would be a long one, but only the British Army could do it.

The Meeting -

- (1) Took note of the statement by the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland.

The Meeting then considered the situation arising out of

- (i) the statement made by the Committee in control of the barricaded Catholic areas in Belfast and Londonderry, and released at midday that day; and
- (ii) the intention of the Northern Ireland Government to put out a statement on the removal of the barricades.

With regard to (i) an authoritative text of the Committee's statement was not available, but its main points appeared to be: that there should be no negotiations on the removal of barricades

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unless an assurance were given that the provisions of the Special Powers Act would not be invoked against anyone inside the barricades; and that if negotiations were opened on this basis, assurances would be required on the disarmament and disbandment of the USC: the disarming and reorganisation of the RUC: the repeal of the Special Powers Act: and amnesty for "everyone who defended his home": the implementation of a civil rights covenant and legislation by Westminster in the event of failure to implement measures of reform.

The Committee had also indicated that they were only prepared to negotiate with the Army authorities and not with the Northern Ireland Government.

With regard to (ii) the Northern Ireland Cabinet were at that moment considering the text of a possible statement. As it stood at present, it included a demand for the removal of the barricades within a fixed time limit, failing which they would be removed if necessary by force.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that so far as the statement by the Committee was concerned the political issues raised by the statement were the concern not of the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, but of the Northern Ireland Government, which in consultation with the United Kingdom Government was already taking action on most of them. It was quite unacceptable that major political problems of the kind which it raised should be discussed in the context of the removal of barricades, which was a security, not a political, matter. Quite apart from the point of principle involved, an impossible situation would arise if political considerations were injected into each and every negotiation which might take place over the removal of individual barricades or barricade systems. During his visit to Northern Ireland he had consistently refused to negotiate with irresponsible self-appointed bodies on matters which were properly the concern of the legally constituted Government. To abandon this position would weaken the standing of the Northern Ireland Government and lead to a deterioration of our relations with it; and he considered that we must stand firm on this point.

With regard to the proposed statement by the Northern Ireland Government, that Government had been consistently inert. The impetus for reform had come from us. Now, there had been a "Protestant backlash" and the Northern Ireland Government were under pressure from the right wing. If they failed to make a gesture of the kind now contemplated they would lose the confidence of a large section of their supporters. There might be resignations from the Government, and the possibility that the Prime Minister himself might resign could not be altogether discounted. In that event, a government might emerge to which we could not give our support or co-operation. It might even prove impossible to form a government at all, in which case the choice

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would be between a breakdown of law and order and direct rule. The crux of the matter lay in the terms in which the proposed statement would call for the removal of the barricades. The imposition of a time limit and a threat, whether implicit or explicit, to remove the barricades by force would commit the United Kingdom Government, who would have to provide the force; and the Northern Ireland Government could not be allowed to make a statement in these terms without our consent. A decision to use force would have the gravest implications; and he would welcome the views of General Freeland.

GENERAL FREELAND said that he fully agreed that there could be no question of dealing with political issues, which were not his concern, concurrently with the removal of barricades. With regard to the use of force, an extremely dangerous situation would arise if the threat had to be implemented, and particularly if there were resistance. It had to be borne in mind that in the conditions prevailing, it would be virtually impossible to prevent civilian casualties and further material destruction. The use of force should be regarded as a last resort and avoided if humanly possible. If it had to be used, it should be used swiftly and in overwhelming strength. The prospect of embarking on an urban guerilla war was not one we could contemplate.

In the ensuing discussion there was general agreement with the views expressed by the Home Secretary and with the assessment given by the GOC. Given the political situation in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister probably had no alternative to making a statement: but we could not associate ourselves with a statement which fixed a time limit for the removal of the barricades, or threatened the use of force if negotiation failed. It was important to allow full time for moderate forces to come into play, in particular the proposals for the dismantling of barricades which one of the members of the Catholic deputation received by the Home Secretary on 11th September, Mr. Conaty, had undertaken to pursue on his return.

On the other hand, the ultimate sanction of force could not be entirely excluded and had indeed been referred to in the communique issued on 12th September. The GOC should be given authority and the full support of Her Majesty's Government to discuss with the Northern Ireland Government the nature and timing of the measures which would have to be taken for the dismantling of the barricades. If the Northern Ireland Government wished to include a reference on these lines in their statement there would be no objection to their doing so. If they could be induced to issue a statement on lines acceptable to us, it would be useful if the Home Secretary could give a television interview that night in general support of it.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Home Secretary should seek to induce the Northern Ireland Prime Minister to modify his statement on the lines indicated in discussion. If he were prepared to do so, the Home Secretary should himself give a television interview following up the Northern Ireland Prime Minister's statement. The basic points in both contexts were:-

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- (i) There could be no question of entering into a political negotiation in the context of the removal of the barricades. This was a security problem and the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland was empowered to discuss it. He was not empowered to discuss general political issues which are the concern of the legally constituted Government of Northern Ireland, which is dealing through the appropriate constitutional channels with the problems involved.
- (ii) If possible the barricades should be removed by those who erected them, or at least by negotiation and agreement. But come down they must; and the possibility that attempts to secure their removal by peaceful means might fail could not be disregarded.
- (iii) The General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland had been authorised to discuss with the Government of Northern Ireland the nature of the action involved and the manner in which the barricades would be dismantled. In such discussions the GOC would have the full support of Her Majesty's Government. The GOC would not commit himself to any precise timetable. Should there be any question of the use of force, the GOC was to refer back for further instructions when the issue would be considered by Ministers.

The Meeting -

- (2) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.

Cabinet Office, S. W. 1.

16th September, 1969