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Misc.
F. 2

27/8/81

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Possible Anglo-Irish meeting at official level to establish the "facts" about differences between British and Irish perceptions at Ministerial and senior official level relating to aspects of an improved prison regime in the H-Blocks as the basis for/to be introduced following an end to the hunger strike

Taoiseach,

There is the offer of a meeting, as described above, as early as next Thursday, if we wish to take it up. The following is the background.

I attach an extract from the report, already given to you, of discussion at lunch when I met Wade-Gery, the head of the British side of the Joint Study Group on Possible New Institutional Structures on 5th August. You will note that I said that it remained far from clear in political and administrative circles here that the matters discussed with the I.C.J.P. did not provide the basis for a solution. He demurred from the suggestion that the differences between the British and the I.C.J.P. were simply differences of emphasis.

Subsequently, I had the opportunity to read the account, apparently stemming to a large extent from H-Block Committee sources, given in Magill magazine. This tended

- (i) to reinforce the impression that the British had hardened their line and had adopted a strategy on holding out for a cave-in by the prisoners, when whatever further improvements they contemplate would be introduced and
- (ii) the hunger-strikers themselves were holding out for the full five demands or something very close to them.

These impressions also derived from other available information e.g. what had been said by Wade-Gery, what was said by the Ambassador in conveying the reply to the proposal made by the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Against this background, when I had lunch on 11 August with Mr. B. Smith of the British Embassy, I recalled that on 5th August we had run out of time and had been unable to isolate the differences in perception on "facts" and that in any case Wade-Gery had been reluctant to go into any "chapter and verse" discussion, possibly, inter alia, because he was not

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directly involved. This led me to refer to the difficulties in comparing perceptions on "facts" through diplomatic channels which did not facilitate direct exchanges on perceptions we derived from the other sources available to us with those of the British officials directly dealing with the matter. I said that, speaking purely personally, I wondered whether there would be benefit from a meeting of officials directly concerned on both sides on this question of "facts". I had in mind such questions as the following list-which I have extended to cover later information e.g.

What is the basis for the British perception (suggested by Wade-Gery not to be simply Mrs. Thatcher's perception, although we don't have to accept this) that, on the basis of the ICJP proposals, "they did not have a deal"?

What do they see as the sticking-points for them on (a) work (b) association? What is on offer from them in these areas? What exactly is it that they believe the prisoners would settle for on these points?

What is the basis for their saying (Tatham to Whelan, 14 August) that "there is no doubt that those concerned know what it is"? i.e. is on offer.

Smith phoned me this morning to say that he had mentioned this idea to the Northern Ireland Office people. They had felt there might be some benefit in such a meeting and, having regard to availability of relevant people on their side, could have a meeting on Thursday next, although it could, of course, be held at another time if this did not suit us.

As further background, in considering whether this offer should be taken up, I should add that I also discussed in a general way with Smith, another idea on the H-Blocks situation going further than the first. I again stressed that I was working out the idea on a purely personal basis and indeed recalled that when I raised it in London on 27th July, it gave rise to reservations on my own side, as well as on the other side of the table. This idea was concerned with avoidance of a situation where a continuing impasse on the H-Blocks paralysed Anglo-Irish relations. It related to the possibility that the two sides might explore, possibly at Ministerial level ultimately, whether they could agree on what, in the view of the Irish, would represent a genuine committed effort by the British that could widely be seen to be such by public opinion throughout Ireland, to resolve the situation, on the basis that if the British made this effort and even if it was unsuccessful in resolving the situation, there would not then be paralysis in other aspects of Anglo-Irish relations. I referred to reasons why such an idea

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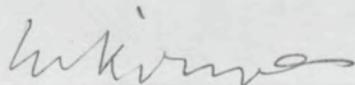
might not find favour here - that it would give a major hostage to fortune, might put us in the hands of the British - and prison staff etc. - on the actual handling on the ground, that if deaths continued indefinitely in the H-Blocks any Government here might find it difficult to refrain from recurring efforts, publicly visible, to solve the problem.

Smith also noted likely reservations on the British side but the idea may have some attraction to the Foreign Office. One must therefore at least take note of the possibility that in offering a meeting on the "facts", they wish to draw us further.

Whatever about the merits or demerits of the second idea, we certainly will not wish to get into that territory, in advance of the review meeting next week.

The question then is - should we take up the offer of the meeting on the "facts", on the basis that the Irish side would make it clear in agreeing to a meeting that it was confined to this aspect? My reaction is that we should on the basis that it cannot but be helpful to have a clear understanding of British perception, as we face up to decisions on whether you should meet Mrs. Thatcher; soon even if the H-Block situation continues, if so how to deal with those circumstances for a meeting etc. For these reasons, if the meeting is to take place there is advantage in it taking place this week. If it were to be in Belfast, Mr. Burke could attend as he will be in the North anyway this week. Mr. Lillis should probably go and I could go, if pressure of preparations for the review meeting permit.

I can see some danger that in giving us their perception of the "facts", the British will try to lead us to share these perceptions. At the meeting itself, however, we could indicate that we will simply take away the outcome and report to Ministers, for their consideration, in conjunction with other information.



W. KIRWAN
Assistant Secretary

17th August, 1981.

c.c. Mr. Lillis
Mr. Whelan
Mr. Burke
Minister for Foreign Affairs.