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Note:

I telephoned Mr. Wyatt, Under-Secretary, N.I.O on 24 July, and raised with him the reports that MacFarlane, the Provisional I.R.A. "leader" in the H-Blocks had said that he was prepared to play a minor and apparently passive role in a meeting between British Officials, the Hunger-Strikers, their relatives and spiritual advisers. I said that we found this more conciliatory position interesting and expressed the hope that it would be followed up by the British authorities.

Wyatt said that they approached with caution remarks of this kind which are floated by I.R.A. spokesmen and often denied later. One has to be watchful and not take these statements at their facevalue.

I remarked that when the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace had been in contact with the Hunger-Strikers, contacts with MacFarlane had also been facilitated and he had been in an adjoining room or in the corridor outside and easily accessible at various times during those talks. This suggested an approach which might well prove fruitful if followed again particularly in association with a larger meeting of the kind proposed by Mr. Canning.

Wyatt replied that the position of the I.C.J.P. and that of the Government were very different. It was necessary to steer a line between withholding concession on a major matter such as recognition of MacFarlane's supposed status and allowing progress to be made. The NIO felt that they were steering such a line in letting MacFarlane talk for an hour with the Hunger-Strikers after Belloch's visit (he did not stipulate which visit, 15 or 21 July) and in letting MacFarlane talk directly to the ICJP. Wyatt added that while the Canning idea for Hunger-Strikers, relatives and priests to get together was potentially useful they felt that Mr. Canning himself made a point when (as quoted in the Irish News) he said that the arrangement would only serve a purpose if the British authorities had something different to say. There isn't anything different to say, said Wyatt, and a fundamental gulf on the

essential issues of work and association remains.

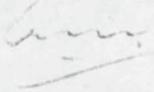
He expanded for sometime on these matters but was essentially repeating the British point that prisoners in the final analysis must do work that was assigned to them and that association could not involve more than two adjoining wings with celldoors closed. He incidentally acknowledged that clothing would not perhaps ultimately prove difficult.

I repeated our fundamental point that MacFarlane had now apparently taken up a more conciliatory position. There are periodic swings in the attitudes expressed by the IRA spokesmen and the prisoners. Hardline positions were regularly succeeded by suggestions of a softer line. We were now in the presence of what looked like a softer line and the opportunity could surely not be neglected to see whether or not it was genuine. The existence of the slightest opportunity of this sort was of great interest to our Government given the gravity of the problem and its effects. We would be very reluctant to believe that this opportunity should be ignored.

Wyatt replied that the main consideration in the British view was the outcome of any approach to the Hunger-Strikers. In the case of failure the British would be left just as they are now except for having given a status to Mc Farlane which had never up to now been accorded to him.

I said that status was surely a question of degree. Diplomatically people could be and frequently were admitted to talks without their been accorded the full status of participants. Perhaps MacFarlane could be admitted to the passive role he would now apparently be satisfied with. While the NIO would make it publicly clear that his presence did not represent recognition by the that he held any particular position. Something could surely be "fudged" so that the change of success which now seemed to exist would be taken up, but any ground lost towards MacFarlane in the process could subsequently be recovered?

Mr. Wyatt assured me that they are not going to ignore any opportunity. They would look for evidence that what ~~he~~<sup>I</sup> had described as a "swing" in this case was genuine. In conclusion he had to say however, that they did not see from all the contacts which they had pursued that the Hunger-Strikers and their supporters saw the strike as ending otherwise than on the basis of the five demands been conceded.

  
D.M. Neligan

24 July 1981