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RECORD OF A DISCUSSION ON THE SITUATION IN THE MAZE PRISON HELD IN
SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG'S OFFICE ON 27 JULY 1981

This discussion was the concluding item in a meeting which has been separately recorded (see AI(81) 23). Those present were:

Sir Robert Armstrong (Secretary of the Cabinet)
In the Chair
Mr R L Wade-Gery (Cabinet Office)
Mr P H C Eyers (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
Mr D Nally (Secretary of the Irish Government)
Mr W Kirwan (Department of the Taoiseach)
Mr D Neligan (Head of Anglo-Irish, Information and
Cultural Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Dublin)
Mr W N Wenban-Smith (Cabinet Office)
Mr G Corr (First Secretary, Irish Embassy) } Note-takers

Mr Nally said that he did not propose to talk about the details of the situation, but rather to air its wider aspects. Tremendous damage was being done in the South, and not only in the security field. A few months ago no-one would have expected that two Maze prisoners would be elected to the Dail; nor that demonstrations of the scale and violence seen in Dublin on 18 July would be conceivable. But these reflected the advances being made by the IRA, both as regards recruitment - which would do incalculable damage - and as regards the propaganda battle, which they were winning in the South, in the United States, and indeed, though less importantly, elsewhere in Europe. The general attitude had been that the hunger strikers, given their criminal records, should be left to die if that was what they wanted; now the emphasis was on the incidents which had led them to take up arms. Meanwhile the hunger strikers' demands were moving away from "political status", involving differentiation from ordinary prisoners; they also recognised that the prison authorities had to retain control in the prisons. However mistakes made on timing [implicitly by the British] had aggravated the difficulties. Could not the flow of information to the Irish government be improved? The Taoiseach had been about to make a strong speech, but had cancelled it when he learnt through his own channels (that the Duke of Norfolk and Lord Elton were intervening.) The Irish quite understood that certain matters, such as contacts with the IRA, might need to be kept under wraps; but they were very well aware of those contacts. They were bound to be suspicious if they were given what purported to be a full account of transactions going on, when they knew this not to be the case. That suspicion could be removed if they

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could be given, confidentially, a full account of all that was going on. Mr Kirwan added that what was at stake for Ireland went beyond propaganda and electoral considerations; if the IRA succeeded in bringing down the government, this could bring about a state of instability in Ireland which would have an international impact on the country's standing. Mr Neligan cited the prisoners' statement of 4 July as an example of a missed opportunity. Admittedly they had since made hard-line statements, and so the caution of the British authorities was understandable. But the Irish would like to see the United Kingdom government act quickly in response to the softer statements: it was important, in propaganda terms, to demonstrate the intransigence of the IRA. He recognised that the Irish government might appear to fuss over minutiae, but this was a reflection of their concern to find ways of demonstrating that it was the hunger strikers who were being unreasonable.

How?

Sir Robert Armstrong said that the British government shared the apprehensions of the Irish about the propaganda effect of the present situation, especially in the United States and Northern Ireland. Ground has been lost among the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, which was becoming more alienated again. Further sectarian violence in the North had been avoided, but there had been trouble on the streets, which was leading to instability. Like the Irish, the British government wished to see the situation resolved. As regards the flow of information, he noted the Irish concern, and would look into the matter, with a view to seeing what, if anything, could be done to improve channels of communication. As regards the points made by Mr Neligan, he agreed that the hunger strikers' position had changed in successive statements. The government had been trying to show some degree of flexibility, while maintaining control in the prison and refusing political status. He accepted that they might not have gone as far or as fast as the Irish would have wished, but he did not think that the Irish government would want them to depart from their stand of principle; they had appreciated the Taoiseach's reported statement on the issue, which had been very forthright. An official had gone into the prison; but the government were apprehensive about being sucked point by point beyond what was acceptable. There had been no developments during the weekend over McFarlane's involvement, but it was difficult to see what more could be done, so long as the five demands were maintained.

Mr Nally said that the Irish had no solution to offer; they were not urging

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the granting of political status; but from a delicate source they had an inkling that there might be movement on the part of the prisoners. Mr Neligan said that the British side would be aware of the arguments the Irish government had put concerning the participation of McFarlane; and the Irish side understood the differences of approach regarding the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace proposals. They supported the British government's "negative bottom-lines" - for example they agreed that it was for the prison authorities, not the prisoners, to decide what tasks should be undertaken. But there was still room for improvements in presentation, for example by widening the area of choice of work to be undertaken, though not to the extent envisaged by the ICJP. From their contacts with HM Ambassador, they understood that there was now less of a problem over free association between the prisoners. As regards McFarlane the Irish had the impression that his views had on earlier occasions been accepted by the NIO as representing those of other prisoners. Was there not room now to fudge this point, for example by allowing his presence on the grounds of the physical feebleness of the hunger strikers? The Irish had noted with satisfaction the NIO officials' approach to the prisoners, and ^{seen} its negative outcome. They hoped that the British would not allow themselves to be discouraged by this. Sir Robert Armstrong commented that anything which gave the impression of direct negotiation with the Provisionals would have severe political consequences. Mr Kirwan said that it was unsatisfactory for a government to have to explain its policy to convicted prisoners; unfortunately this was necessary, given the prisoners' suspicions of what had happened between the lifting of the previous hunger strike on 18 December 1980 and its renewal in February 1981. Would it now be possible for the British government to provide further clarification to the prisoners, knowing that this would become public, on the basis of the additional information contained in the Embassy's note dated 9 July and the material in Mr Atkins' letter to Bishop O'Mahoney? Sir Robert Armstrong said that there was really very little left to give away. If there were the smallest sign of movement on the other side, such as might lead to a conclusion, there might be possibilities. Mr Nally acknowledged that the British government were on quite strong ground; but the more they produced offers which were then turned down, the stronger their position would be. But it was certainly difficult to extract a consistent answer from the four parties engaged on the other side; the prisoners, the hunger strikers, the IRA and the INLA. He could perhaps say something further, if it looked as if a solution were emerging. Mr Kirwan

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said that it was clear that Mr Alison had gone further in talking to the ICJP than Mr Atkins had been prepared to go in his 8 July statement. He recognised the difficulty of making offers in the absence of any sign of a solution; but it was important to bear in mind the influence of such an offer on the United States and other opinion. Sir Robert Armstrong said that there was no end to the small additional concessions that might be asked of the British government; but the room for manoeuvre was in fact extremely small. The government had to take account of opinion in Northern Ireland; the views of prison officers in the Province; and the limits to the creation of further disparities between the treatment of prisoners in Northern Ireland and those in Great Britain. Mr Nally said that there were suggestions that Northern Ireland prison officers were not averse to the continuation of the hunger strike, because of the resulting overtime earnings. Unionist criticisms of concessions to the hunger strikers would be softened by the fact that UDA members would also benefit. Mr Neligan added that Unionists would be relieved at the settlement of the hunger strike because its continuance re-inforced demands for a Catholic Ireland, both North and South. Mr Kirwan commented that, just as there was an interaction between the Unionists and the British government, so was there interaction between the Catholic community and the government of the Republic. Emphasising that he was speaking personally Mr Kirwan suggested that it might be possible for the Irish government to give a lead by establishing, with the British, parameters of action, and then making known their support for those agreed limits. Mr Nally said that the IRA would be certain to reject any proposal which they believed to be the result of agreement between the Irish and British governments. Concluding, Sir Robert Armstrong said that a proposal of this kind would be very difficult for the United Kingdom too. However the morning's discussion had served to emphasise the need for good channels of information between the two governments; meanwhile the Prime Minister had very much welcomed the Taoiseach's statement to the effect that it was now up to the prisoners themselves how the hunger strike ended. Mr Kirwan commented that he was not sure that the Taoiseach had used the actual words ascribed to him in press reports.

Cabinet Office

3 August 1981

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