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RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND MR. JAMES MOLYNEAUX, MP, AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON 14 MAY 1981 AT 2000 HOURS

Present

The Prime Minister

Mr. James Molyneaux

The Secretary of State
for Northern Ireland

Mr. Ian Gow

Mr. Michael Alexander

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The Prime Minister said that, as far as the hunger strike was concerned, Mr. Molyneaux need have no worry about the policy of HMG. The Government did not intend to change its position in any way. Mr. Molyneaux welcomed this assurance. He added that even if the Government were to seek a compromise, it would be futile. The PIRA would always refuse to be "criminalised". They wanted nothing less than separate status.

Mr. Molyneaux asked if there was any way in which he or members of his Party could help the Government. The Secretary of State suggested that perhaps they could lend assistance in the propaganda battle. In the United States, for instance, the Irish voices which were being heard were in the most part Republican. It would be helpful if some Unionists could go there to speak and appear on television. Mr. Molyneaux said he was going to Canada in mid-June but doubted that he would have time to go to the United States. There was, however, a possibility that Mr. McCusker might be able to make a visit. Mr. Molyneaux undertook to pursue the matter.

Mr. Molyneaux said that he believed public opinion was becoming increasingly dismayed at daily scenes of inadequately equipped soldiers and policemen being assaulted with petrol bombs. Should not consideration be given to the reintroduction of the water cannon and tear gas? The Secretary of State said that these were matters on which he took the operational

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advice of the Chief Constable. For the moment, the Chief Constable preferred to use the baton round. This had the advantage of keeping the rioters at a sufficient distance to make the petrol bombs relatively ineffective. It was, of course, Government policy that the operational commanders could have whatever equipment they wanted. The Prime Minister confirmed this. Mr. Molyneaux took the point, but said that perhaps the Government should make it clear to the operational commanders that they would indeed be given what they asked for. He felt at present they were inhibited in asking for new types of equipment. The Prime Minister said that, whatever might have been the case under the previous Administration, the forces of law and order knew that the present Government was on their side. Mr. Molyneaux agreed.

Mr. Molyneaux asked whether the high velocity SLR should not be supplemented by low velocity weapons. High velocity weapons often injured more than one person. The Secretary of State repeated that he relied upon the advice of the operational commanders on issues such as this.

Mr. Molyneaux raised the question of the recent mortar attacks at Newtownhamilton and Rosslea. The mortars had clearly been manufactured, tested and practice-fired in the Republic. The authorities in the Republic were surely aware of this. The sounds of test-firing had been heard north of the Border for weeks past. The Secretary of State agreed that there had been some evidence of test-firing. If any hard evidence became available, it would be put to the Irish authorities at once. The recent success by the security forces at Forkhill showed that cross-Border cooperation was working well.

Mr. Molyneaux said that he was not persuaded that the use of the army on the Border was as effective as it might be. He accepted the primacy of the police in the Province as a whole but should the armed forces not be given a freer rein along the

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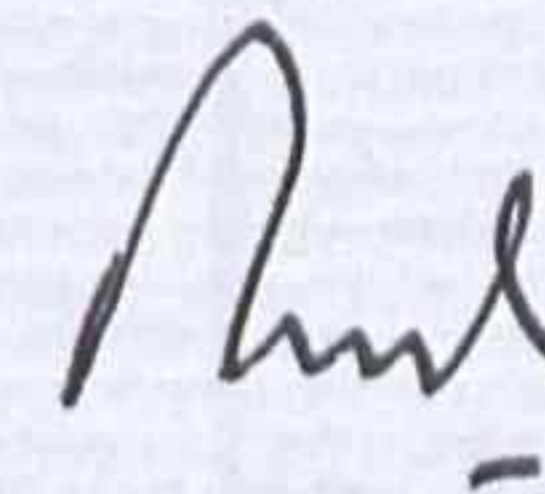
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frontier? The present policy was to concentrate the soldiers in particular locations. The Secretary of State said that this was an operational matter. There were more troops in the Border areas than might at first seem apparent. No troops had been removed from the Border area to deal with the present difficulties in urban districts. He would be very glad to arrange for Mr. Molyneaux to visit the Border areas and meet the Commanders there. He would be happy to accompany Mr. Molyneaux on such a visit. Mr. Molyneaux accepted the offer.

Mr. Molyneaux asked whether it would not be possible for the customs officers to carry out their job more effectively than at present. The Secretary of State sympathised with Mr. Molyneaux's question, though he felt bound to point out that the customs service was responsible to the Chancellor of the Exchequer rather than to him.

Mr. Molyneaux asked whether co-ordination between governments in tackling international terrorism could not be improved. The Prime Minister said that there was already a great deal of co-operation between governments. However, she would consider whether the matter could not be referred to again, e.g. in a communique from a future European Council meeting.

The meeting ended at 2020.



15 May 1981