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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH NORTHERN IRELAND CHURCH LEADERS:
3.00 PM, THURSDAY 28 MAY 1981, STORMONT CASTLE.

Present: The Prime Minister
The Secretary of State
Mr Whitmore
Mr Alexander
Mr Boys Saith
Dr Butler
The Reverend R Craig
The Reverend S Callaghan

The Prime Minister said that recent events showed some members of both communities in Northern Ireland were ready to stand up for what they believed was right, irrespective of pressure and traditional loyalties. This, and the efforts by church and other leaders to promote harmony, were facts from which comfort could be taken. The hunger strike had not led to the disorders which some had feared, and she noted that the Pope had told her there could be no question of granting political status. She appreciated, however, that feelings in both communities ran deeply and that whatever view might be held of the PIRA or the hunger strikers, there was a good deal of sympathy on the Catholic side for republican principles. She invited the church leaders for their views of the present situation.

Dr Butler, speaking personally, said that in his view the hunger strikes and associated events had left the gap between the communities wider than he could remember it, although they had not led to inter-sectarian strife. The Fermanagh bye-election had been a particular shock to the Protestant community. The fact that so many Catholics had voted for Sands had done much to undermine the trust that Protestants had in the Catholic community as a whole. He had much sympathy for those moderate Catholics who perceived this changed attitude amongst Protestants and understood its cause, whilst knowing

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at the same time that the bye-election did not truly reflect the degree of Catholic support for the PIRA. Some Protestants saw the Catholic hierarchy as supporting the PIRA, though he did not believe they really did, and he had sympathy for the position the Cardinal and his colleagues found themselves in.

In these circumstances Dr Butler believed it was essential to do everything possible to further trust and to support moderates in both communities. Thought had to be given to the predicament of moderate Catholics and to the pressure they could be under. Much work had been undone in recent weeks and feelings were running high. A considerable amount of work would be needed to rebuild trust. He agreed that the churches had a leading part to play, although they could not succeed on their own.

Mr Craig agreed that the bye-election had greatly shocked the Protestant community and that trust was less than it had been as a result. This was extended to rural areas where normally there were not the divisions traditionally seen in the towns. He was glad to note that there had not been intersectarian conflict as a result. In part this reflected the work of the security forces. But it also reflected the way in which churches and other organisations had worked to promote harmony. Relations between the clergy of different denominations were good and he was anxious they should remain so, although he regretted it had proved less easy to meet the Cardinal in discussions in recent weeks than it had been before. The Cardinal, although he had criticised the Government for inflexibility, had said he did not think political status should be granted. The churches and all other community leaders should now look for ways in which trust could be built up again.

Mr Callaghan said he agreed the Government had been right to stand firm over the hunger strikes. But the strikes raised deep emotions in the Catholic community and amongst those of a "celtic temperament". It could not be expected that the reaction either to the Government's policy or to a possible waning of interest in the hunger strikes by

the public at large would be the one that logic suggested. There was therefore a risk of continuing polarisation; the work of restoring lost trust would not be at all easy.

In further discussion of the position of Dr Paisley, the three church leaders emphasised the way in which those who were not members of his denomination were ready to support him politically without any sense of disloyalty towards their own denomination. They offered their political support sometimes for no better reason than that they felt he had an important point to make with which they were in broad sympathy. Dr Paisley was a gifted man and was skilled at playing upon people's fears.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister emphasised the fundamental duty imposed upon Government of enforcing the law and preserving order. She believed that good relations between members of the communities could be built only if the Government was successful in this task. The Government could not concede the demands of the hunger strikers. She appreciated that the long term aims of many members of the two communities were irreconcilable. She would like to be able to hope that people's desire to improve the lot of their children and families would prove to be an obstacle to widespread support for disorder, but she feared that her hope would not be realised in Northern Ireland. The Government could additionally provide opportunities to people in Northern Ireland, but it rested with the communities and their leaders to see that the opportunities were taken. Within the constraints imposed upon it the Government would do its best to help ensure that life continued as normally and as fruitfully as possible in Northern Ireland.

Janet Mangels
PP. S W BOYS SMITH
29 May 1981