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SUBJECT

RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE IRISH AMBASSADOR, DR. EAMON KENNEDY, AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON 13 MAY AT 1805 HOURS

Present:-

Prime Minister

H.E. Dr. Eamon Kennedy

Secretary of State for Northern
Ireland

Mr. M.O'D.B. Alexander

After thanking the Prime Minister for seeing him at such short notice, Dr. Kennedy said that the Taoiseach had asked him to stress at the outset the importance he gave to the efforts being made by both Governments to secure reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Both the Prime Ministers had been subjected to a great deal of pressure designed to destroy the developing relationship between Dublin and London. Both had resisted. But there was now a real danger that they might be blown off course by the growing tension in Northern Ireland and by its repercussions elsewhere.

There would soon be an election in the Republic. It was conceivable that IRA candidates might, for the first time, stand. They might win considerable support. Against that background, the Taoiseach considered the time was ripe for a political initiative. Two hunger strikers had died. There would now be a pause before any more "candidates for martyrdom" lost their lives. This pause should be exploited. It would, of course, be risky to make a move. It would be equally risky not to move.

The Irish Government recognised that political status for the hunger strikers was "not on". But within the five demands, would it not be possible to move on clothes and on association outside work periods? It might also be useful to consider making use of the European Commission of Human Rights or its Secretary-General; to consider appointing an outsider to review the situation; or to pursue the suggestion which Mr. Stephen Ross, MP, had

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just put forward. The Irish Government had reason to believe that if movement could be secured on the two issues which Dr. Kennedy had mentioned, the strike would collapse. There could be no certainty about it but that was their assessment. The collapse of the strike would, of course, have^{an} enormous impact on Anglo/Irish relations. The Taoiseach would want to come to London to signal the opening of a new chapter in the bilateral relationship.

Dr. Kennedy said, finally, that he had been anxious to see the Prime Minister before Mr. Hume called in order to stress the importance the Irish Government attached to securing some sort of movement in the present impasse.

The Prime Minister recalled that the last thing Bobby Sands had said before lapsing into a coma was that he wanted all five demands. Nothing less would do. Hughes had taken the same position. So had his brother on television the previous evening. The fact was that the hunger strikers wanted political status. The Prime Minister also recalled her meeting with Dr. Kennedy before the first hunger strike had begun in the autumn of last year. She had told him then of the Government's decision to allow the issue of civilian clothes to conforming prisoners. The NIO had later published an account of the situation in The Maze which had made it clear that this was one of the most humane and up-to-date prisons in the world. Everybody knew this. The rules, of course, were those appropriate to the running of a prison. They did not give the inmates prisoner of war status. There could be no question of HMG submitting to salami tactics leading to political status. Hughes had been a murderer not a prisoner of war. Freedom of association was not possible. Anything that was made available to prisoners in The Maze would have to be made available throughout prisons in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland called attention to a recent article in An Phoblacht which had stressed that nothing less than the five demands would end the hunger strike. Dr. Kennedy had said that the Irish Government had reason to believe that meeting two demands would end the hunger strike. The hunger strikers themselves denied this.

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Dr. Kennedy said that if the Secretary of State was right about the reality, there was no hope of breaking the deadlock. But the relatives of the hunger strikers had led the authorities in Dublin to think that it might be possible to sway the hunger strikers. He repeated that there could be no certainty. But he hoped that if there was some give in the British Government's position, a way out might be found. The Prime Minister said that the European Commission of Human Rights were "welcome to come in". We had nothing to hide. But we could not invite the Commission in. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that someone had to make a complaint. The Commission could not accept an invitation from HMG. Dr. Kennedy recalled that the Commission had said in its 1978 Report that in one or two respects the regime was inflexible. The Secretary of State said that it was for this very reason that nine different changes in the regime had been introduced last year. Dr. Kennedy stressed that he had only mentioned the point because of the need to find a mechanism to reintroduce the Commission into the situation.

The Secretary of State recalled that Bobby Sands had refused to endorse the complaints made by his sister. If any of the other hunger strikers or their relatives complained, HMG would give the Commission every facility. The Prime Minister commented that if Dr. Kennedy's account of the prisoners' frame of mind was correct, they ought themselves to be willing to complain. Dr. Kennedy acknowledged the point adding that his authorities were trying to "get the hunger strikers into that frame of mind". They continued to believe that the Commission of Human Rights or its parent body, the Council of Europe, had a role. The Irish Foreign Minister, Mr. Lenihan, was at present in Strasbourg discussing the situation. Some way must be found to end the present tragic chapter.

Reverting to the frame of mind of the hunger strikers, Dr. Kennedy said that the fact that there were hundreds of prisoners who still enjoyed special category status was bound to affect the outlook of those prisoners who did not have special category status. The case of Bobby Sands was particularly relevant: he was a prisoner who had had special category status during a

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previous period in prison. The Prime Minister asked whether there was any possibility of moving the existing special category prisoners. The Secretary of State said there was at present insufficient space to permit this though something might be done later in the year. A good deal would depend on whether or not the dirty protest was renewed. Dr. Kennedy said he did not wish to lay too much stress on the issue of the existing special category prisoners. This was just another ingredient in the situation.

Dr. Kennedy said that support for the IRA in the South and in the North was growing. In the North they now appeared as the natural leaders of the Catholic community, a role previously held by the SDLP. Polarisation was increasing. The men in the middle were being left without a role.

The Prime Minister repeated that if a role could be found for the Commission of Human Rights, acting within its terms of reference, no obstacle would be met from HMG. On the broader situation, she asked Dr. Kennedy to convey to the Taoiseach her appreciation of his attitude in recent days. Like him she had tried to keep alive the search for peace and reconciliation. She had stressed this in what she had said in the House of Commons the previous Thursday and in her speech to the Scottish Party Conference in Perth on Friday. She did not want to give up the progress which had been made. Dr. Kennedy said that the Taoiseach was well aware of what the Prime Minister had done. He also did not wish to be blown off course.

It was agreed that the Ambassador would keep in close touch about developments in the days ahead.

The meeting ended at 1830 hours.

Handwritten signature

13 May 1981

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