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Prime Minister ②

11.7.81

NORTHERN IRELAND: VISIT OF THE MINISTER OF STATE: MR MICHAEL ALISON MP

1. MR ALISON HAD A BUSY 24 HOURS HERE FROM 9-10 JULY DURING WHICH AMONGST OTHER MEDIA INTERVIEWS HE APPEARED ON TWO OF THE MAJOR NETWORK TELEVISION MORNING SHOWS (REACHING AN AUDIENCE OF ABOUT TEN MILLION). HE ALSO HAD MEETINGS ON THE HILL, FIRST WITH CONGRESSMAN ZABLOCKI (CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE) AND SUBSEQUENTLY WITH THE FRIENDS OF IRELAND. HE ALSO SAW REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS.

2. OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS, THERE HAS BEEN FRONT PAGE AND

2. OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS, THERE HAS BEEN FRONT PAGE AND PROMINENT TV COVERAGE OF STREET VIOLENCE IN BELFAST, LINKED TO THE VIOLENCE ON THE STREETS ON THE MAINLAND. THE STORY THAT HAS BEGUN TO COME ACROSS IN THE NEWSPAPERS, REFLECTING THE STATEMENT MADE BY THE IRISH COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, IS OF BRITISH DELAYING TACTICS AND RENEGING ON A FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT THAT COULD HAVE LED TO THE ENDING OF THE HUNGER STRIKE AND POSSIBLY SAVED THE LIFE OF JOE MCDONNELL.

3. IN HIS TELEVISION INTERVIEWS AND ON THE HILL, MR ALISON WAS ABLE TO DEMONSTRATE HIS OWN GOOD FAITH, AS THE MINISTER PRINCIPALLY INVOLVED, AND THAT OF THE GOVERNMENT. NONETHELESS, CRITICISM AMONG THE FRIENDS OF IRELAND WAS VERY STRONG AND THE TEMPERATURE OF THE MEETING WITH MR ALISON DEGREES HOTTER THAN WHEN I LAST SAW THEM TWO WEEKS AGO. SOME OF THOSE PRESENT CLEARLY DID DOUBT OUR GOOD FAITH AND THOUGHT THAT THERE WAS NO QUESTION OF THEIR BEING ABLE TO CONVINCED THEIR CONSTITUENTS THAT WE HAD NOT RENEGED ON THE DEAL. NOW THAT WE HAD APPARENTLY SECURED OUR MAJOR OBJECTIVE OF PERSUADING THE PROTESTERS THAT THEY WOULD NOT BE GIVEN POLITICAL STATUS, THE FRIENDS OF IRELAND COULD NOT COMPREHEND WHY WE WERE PREPARED TO PUT SO MUCH AT RISK, INCLUDING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES, FOR THE SAKE OF SOME SUPPOSED POINT OF PRINCIPLE WHICH NO LONGER HAD VALIDITY. IF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT WISHED TO RETAIN ANY CREDIBILITY IN THE UNITED STATES, AND ALONG WITH IT, THE ABILITY OF MODERATE IRISH AMERICANS TO COMBAT THE GROWING HOLD OF THE PROVISIONAL IRA ON PUBLIC SUPPORT, THEN WE MUST BE SEEN TO BE MOVING SWIFTLY AND DECISIVELY TO PUT TOGETHER SOME CHANGES IN THE PRISON REGIME WHICH WOULD EITHER BRING THE HUNGER STRIKE TO AN END OR AT LEAST ENABLE THE ICJP TO SAY THAT WE HAD GONE THE LAST MILE. THIS IN TURN WOULD ENABLE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS TO SUPPORT OUR POSITION.

4. THIS WAS A HARD HITTING MEETING AND MR ALISON RESPONDED TO GOOD EFFECT. NEVERTHELESS I THINK WE ARE NOW IN A POSITION WHERE, IF WE ARE FACED WITH ANOTHER HUNGER STRIKE DEATH FOR WHICH THE BLAME CAN BE DIRECTED TO US BY BODIES SUCH AS THE ICJP WHICH CARRY CREDIBILITY HERE, THEN SOME OF THE FRIENDS OF IRELAND WILL CARRY OUT THEIR THREAT TO PUT DOWN CONDEMNATORY RESOLUTIONS IN CONGRESS. WHILE THIS MAY NOT MATTER MUCH IN ITSELF IT WILL GIVE A BOOST TO THE PROVISIONALS' PROPAGANDA AND MAY TURN THE FRIENDS, WHO HAVE BEEN MODERATE AND HELPFUL INTO A GROUP THAT NO LONGER SEES ANY ADVANTAGE IN TAKING A POLITICAL RISK FOR THE SAKE OF MODERATION. WHILE LEADING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS LIKE KENNEDY AND O'NEILL WILL NEVER SUPPORT TERRORISM, IF THEY WERE TO SIMPLY GO SILENT ON THE ISSUE THEN THE FIELD WOULD AGAIN BE CLEAR FOR NORAD TO RAISE FUNDS HERE ON A SCALE THAT THEY HAVE NOT ENJOYED FOR THE LAST FIVE YEARS.

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