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Ireland: Meeting with
the Taoiseach PC 3

SUBJECT.

RECORD OF A DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
TAOISEACH, MR. CHARLES HAUGHEY, IN LUXEMBOURG ON MONDAY

1 DECEMBER AT 1915

Present

The Prime Minister
Foreign & Commonwealth
Secretary
Mr. Michael Alexander

The
Taoiseach
Mr. Lenihan
Mr. Nally

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The Prime Minister said that her meeting with the Taoiseach in Dublin now seemed likely, owing to the hunger strike, to take place in circumstances which had not been foreseen when it was arranged. The British Government had done what they could to prevent the hunger strike beginning. She recalled her meeting with the Irish Ambassador in London on the eve of the strike when she had informed him of the Government's decision about clothing for prisoners in Northern Ireland. That decision had been the result of several months' discussion. It had been taken because the Cabinet felt that the change in the regulations was justified on grounds of dignity and humanity. Nonetheless, it had failed to prevent the strike. Since the strike had begun, various statements had been made, in particular by prominent members of the Roman Catholic Church, which had been both forthright and helpful. But the strike continued.

Mr. Haughey said that the Irish Government were enormously worried about the situation. As a result of the hunger strike it had become very volatile. So far public opinion in the Republic had been behind the Government in intensifying security cooperation. But the hunger strike was a highly emotional issue. It might enable the PIRA to mobilise support in a way that they had been unable to do for several years. It would be very helpful to the Irish Government if it were possible for the Prime Minister to

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take some kind of initiative before her arrival in Dublin. There was every reason to expect the meeting between the two Heads of Government to be constructive, but the hunger strike problem was "poisonous". Mr. Haughey stressed that his Government accepted that there could be no compromise on the question of political status. Indeed, if the British Government were to grant the hunger strikers political status, it would embarrass the Irish Government since they did not themselves accord political status to those accused of similar crimes. But a humanitarian gesture would undoubtedly help.

Mr. Lenihan asked whether, for instance, it would not be possible to let the prisoners wear clothing of their own choice. The Prime Minister said that this would be impossible. The British Government had taken their decision on the clothing issue and could go no further. They had already been severely criticised for their decision. Mr. Lenihan said that prisoners in the Republic were allowed to wear their own clothes. There was a slight additional burden on the security guards, who had to search the parcels of clothing coming to prisoners, but few other consequences.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that in his view the hunger strikers would settle for nothing less than political status. Mr. Haughey said that he did not agree with Lord Carrington. The hunger strikers would settle for less. Some movement on the conditions of their imprisonment, e.g. on clothes, or on work, would suffice not only to end the strike but to end the other forms of protest the prisoners had been engaged in. He had hard evidence to this effect. It was, of course, understood that any concession on clothing would not imply that the prisoners would be allowed to wear IRA clothing.

The Prime Minister asked whether there were any other areas in which Mr. Haughey thought that concessions could be useful. Mr. Lenihan referred to exercise and to the possibility of prisoners being allowed to study. The Prime Minister then

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read to Mr. Haughey a list of the concessions which had been available to the protesting prisoners since 26 March, ^{but} which they had rejected. She said that other ameliorations would be available to them if they conformed. She undertook to have a list of these produced.

Mr. Haughey asked whether there was any possibility of nominating a distinguished Englishman to "look at" the prison regime in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister said that she could not see what purpose this would serve. The British Government had for long made it plain that ^{they} had nothing to hide in the prisons in Northern Ireland. TV cameras had been into The Maze more than once. Mr. Lenihan acknowledged the point but asked again whether it would not be possible for the British Government to do "something special" for the prisoners. This should, of course, fall far short of giving them political status. The Prime Minister said ^{that} at the time the Government had taken their decision about clothing it had been argued that concessions should be made during the hunger strike rather than before it. She had, however, decided that the concessions should be made before the hunger strike began in the hope of preventing it. She had gone a long way and now could go no further. However, she would of course be prepared to consider "dressing up" what had already been offered.

Mr. Lenihan said that this could be important. Cosmetic changes were really what he and Mr. Haughey had been talking about. Mr. Haughey confirmed that what he had in mind was something presentational. He was confident that the hunger strikers could be "pushed off" the strike. The Prime Minister agreed to look again at the presentation of the improvements in prison conditions which were already on offer to the hunger strikers. But she stressed that she did not wish to mislead Mr. Haughey. No other new concessions would be made. She had already taken "a lot of stick." Mr. Haughey said that he understood. A further look at the sort of points the Prime Minister had already summarised was what he wanted.

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It was agreed that officials in London would see what could be done to re-package the suggestions already on the table. The outcome would be communicated to the Irish authorities in Dublin before the end of the week.

The discussion ended at 1935.

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1 December 1980

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