

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr. Gerry Fitt, MP, called on the Prime Minister at his own request in the House of Commons at 1535 this afternoon to discuss reports of a possible visit by the Pope to Northern Ireland.

Mr. Fitt said that he had already discussed the matter with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and was in total agreement with Mr. Atkins' approach. But it had to be recognised that this would be a unique chance for the Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland to see the head of their Church; and that it would be widely felt that if a visit did not take place it would be the fault of Mr. Ian Paisley.

The Prime Minister told Mr. Fitt that the British Government had received no request from the Vatican for a visit by the Pope. If a request were to be received for the Pope to visit the United Kingdom, he would be welcome. It would have to be borne in mind that he would come to the United Kingdom as a Head of State; and this would have certain implications. If we received any indication that he wished to come, we would of course be happy to discuss all the arrangements for his visit with the Vatican in the usual way.

Mr. Fitt again asked whether the Government had received any representations from the Vatican about a visit. The Prime Minister repeated that we had not. If we did receive such representations, they would be considered favourably. Mr. Fitt asked if he could say this to his friends. The Prime Minister said that, so far as she was concerned, Mr. Fitt could say that the British Government had received no indication from the Vatican that the Pope wished to pay us a visit; that he would be a welcome visitor to the United Kingdom; and that if he wished to come we would be happy to discuss the arrangements with the Vatican in the usual way.

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At the Prime Minister's request, Mr. Gow and I checked this formulation with Mr. Fitt before he left the Prime Minister's office.

At 1745, the following item appeared on the PA tapes:

"Pope 'welcome' in Ulster. The Pope would be very welcome if he wished to visit Ulster. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told Irish Catholic MP Mr. Gerry Fitt today. In a private meeting at Westminster, Mr. Fitt, leader of the mainly Catholic Social Democratic and Labour Party, Mrs. Thatcher said that all necessary security arrangements would be made. 'She said she had had no word from the Vatican yet, but that if the Pope wanted to visit the UK he would be a very welcome guest', Mr. Fitt said."

At 1815, I received a telephone call from Mr. Ian Paisley. Mr. Paisley said that he was deeply concerned by reports that the Prime Minister had issued a statement to the effect that the Pope would be welcome in Northern Ireland. This seemed completely at variance with the assurance which he had been given by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that, if there were any question of a visit by the Pope to Ulster, the elected representatives of the people of Ulster would be heard before decisions were taken.

I explained to Mr. Paisley that the Prime Minister had made no statement about a possible visit by the Pope. Any statements emerging from the No. 10 Press Office were designed to correct misleading reports which had appeared on the tapes of a conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr. Fitt. I repeated to Mr. Paisley the terms of the No. 10 correction. Mr. Paisley emphasised several times that the situation in Northern Ireland was now extremely serious as a result of these statements and that "we were sitting on a powder keg".

/ He repeated

He repeated that the statements which were emerging seemed to conflict with the assurance Mr. Atkins had given. He would like a repetition of that assurance to be given by No. 10 and he would, ideally, like to discuss the matter with the Prime Minister personally. If the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland could not be heard, he, Mr. Paisley, could not be held responsible for the consequences. If an opportunity for a hearing were denied, he saw no use in politics nor in the ballot box.

I told Mr. Paisley that, if Mr. Atkins had spoken to him in these terms, I was confident that the Prime Minister would endorse them; but that I would first wish to discuss the matter with Mr. Atkins. I undertook to telephone Mr. Paisley when I had done so.

I have since received advice from Mr. Atkins' office that Mr. Atkins did not, in fact, give Mr. Paisley the assurance attributed to him. Mr. Atkins suggests that I should telephone Mr. Paisley, making it clear that I was doing so with the Prime Minister's authority, to repeat to him the corrective statement put out by the No. 10 Press Office this evening, emphasising the words "United Kingdom". I should go on to say that if a proposal for a visit by the Pope were to be received, the detailed arrangements for such a visit would be discussed "in consultation with those concerned in the UK". I should then say that the Government and ^{of course} Mr. Atkins ^{himself} would welcome Mr. Paisley's views ~~on the matter.~~ ^{as part of the} ^{process.}

26 July 1979