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RECORD OF A MEETING HELD AT 10 DOWNING STREET AT 1445 HOURS ON
MONDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 1980

Present: The Prime Minister
 Home Secretary
 Secretary of State for Wales
 Mr. C.A. Whitmore
 Mr. M.A. Pattison

The Home Secretary said that he wished to report to the Prime Minister on the issue of Welsh language broadcasting in the face of Mr. Gwynfor Evans' threat to fast to death. He and Mr. Edwards had had various consultations. Most recently, they had met Lord Cledwyn, the Archbishop of Wales and Sir Goronwy Daniel, a former PUS at the Welsh Office and now Chancellor of the University of Wales. The view of this group had been that they did not themselves regard the issue as a vital one, but they saw the price of continuing on the present course as very severe for Wales. They believed that Gwynfor Evans would be prepared to fast to death, and they had asked whether Ministers were really prepared to cope with this. The Home Secretary said that he and Mr. Edwards had both been very shaken by this. The Prime Minister commented that, bearing in mind the Government's Welsh manifesto commitment, this would be disastrous.

The Home Secretary said that they had also considered the situation in the House of Lords. Lord Belstead had advised that if the Government proceeded on its present course, with an inadequate amendment tabled in the Lords, there could be no guarantee that this would pass. Labour and Liberal peers would vote against, probably with many cross-benchers. And indeed some Conservative Party supporters were uneasy about the manifesto angle. If the Government were defeated in the Lords, they would be faced with the prospect of trying to restore the position in the Commons after Mr. Evans had begun his fast.

/ The Home Secretary

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The Home Secretary said that he had now made up his mind that the policy must be changed. He could not recommend to colleagues the continuation of the present approach. The Prime Minister commented that the last thing the Government needed was to inflame nationalism again. Mr. Edwards commented that he had had a fresh look at the problem, after taking a break to distance himself from the various petitions and representations he had received. He had concluded that the Government's initial choice may have been right, but it was now fostering insuperable political problems. He found the constituencies heavily in favour of going back to the manifesto position. With one exception, the Welsh Conservative MPs were also in favour of this. The exception was Delwyn Williams, who considered that this would be giving in to violence. But for him the decisive moment had been a conversation with Lord Gibson-Watt, who said that he would have found it very difficult to vote for the Government in the Lords. Without Lord Gibson-Watt, the position in the House of Lords would have been intolerable. Mr. Edwards confirmed that in three years' time the Party might see that it had been wrong to line up behind the single channel solution. But for the present the manifesto commitment remained the key for the Party. Against this background, he felt that the issue was simply not big enough to justify the problems involved in sticking to the existing course.

The Home Secretary said that, if the Prime Minister was prepared to accept this advice, the remaining major question was how to handle it. The group which he and Mr. Edwards had met earlier in the week had argued that it would be reasonable for the Government to reverse its position over the trial period, and to test the single channel option for three years. He proposed to accept this, even though he believed that this would be bogus as a trial. The die would be cast after three years. He therefore had it in mind to write to this group saying that the Government had its doubts, but given the range of Welsh opinion which the three represented, Ministers were prepared to approach it in the way they recommended. The Home Secretary accepted that this would be represented as the Government having run away in the face of Mr. Gwynfor Evans' position. But those like Lord Cledwyn, the Archbishop of Wales

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and Sir Goronwy Daniel, who had pressed for a reversal of approach, would have an interest in presenting the outcome as a victory for them, not simply as a victory for Mr. Evans.

Mr. Edwards drew the Prime Minister's attention to Mr. Evans' various subsidiary demands. He had laid down conditions on the timetable and other details. His style had always been to raise the stakes and Mr. Edwards felt that Mr. Evans might hedge on whether he was giving up his threat until the legislation was well on in the House of Lords.

The Home Secretary said that both the BBC and the IBA would be unhappy. The IBA in particular would be angry, and would require a direction to be included in the legislation. He would have to speak to the Chancellor before making an announcement. Any additional money would have to come in part from the IBA levy and in part from the licence fee. The Prime Minister commented that this would apply only to Welsh viewers. Mr. Edwards said that this was not possible. If it was now announced that the cost would be met purely from Welsh viewers, there would be even more trouble. The Prime Minister asked why the BBC need be involved. Mr. Whitelaw explained that, under the proposed new arrangements, the BBC would have to provide some Welsh programmes to be broadcast on the fourth channel.

Mr. Whitelaw said that he would also have to clear his lines with the Lord President and the Leader of the House. A substantial amendment to the Bill would be needed in the Lords, but in fact it might make quicker progress than the existing Bill.

Mr. Whitelaw said that all his political experience had taught him that, if one made a mistake, it was important to get out of it as quick as possible. He hoped to make an announcement on Wednesday, subject to consultations with colleagues. He accepted that the problem had been entirely his own responsibility. Mr. Edwards argued that it would be a great mistake for the Home Secretary to be allowed to present the change as the result of an Englishman's mistake in handling Welsh matters. It should be presented as the Government collectively bowing to the strength of public feeling on the issue.

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The Prime Minister agreed that the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales should proceed as they proposed, subject to consultations with colleagues.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M.D.' or similar, located in the center of the page.

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

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As you know, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales had a word with the Prime Minister this afternoon about Welsh language broadcasting.

The Home Secretary set out the advice which he and Mr. Edwards had received in the course of their wide-ranging consultations on the matter. He referred in particular to their recent meeting with Lord Cledwyn, the Archbishop of Wales and Sir Goronwy Daniel.

He and Mr. Edwards had been taken aback by the strength of feeling that the Government ought to reconsider its policy.

Against this background, and in view of the threat that the legislation might be amended in the Lords, leaving the Government to seek to change it in the Commons during Mr. Evans threatened hunger strike, Mr. Whitelaw had made up his mind that the Government should reverse its position. He could not recommend going on to colleagues in view of the likely consequences. Mr. Edwards confirmed that he had also tried to look at the problem afresh after taking a break. He still believed that the Government's original decision was probably right, but it was now fostering intolerable consequences. Opinion in the Conservative Party in Wales was now firmly in favour of going back to the manifesto position.

The Home Secretary said that Lord Cledwyn, the Archbishop of Wales and Sir Goronwy Daniel had said that it would be reasonable for the Government to announce that it was reversing its approach to the trial period, and now intended to adopt the single channel option during this period. Mr. Whitelaw saw this as an acceptable basis of presenting a change of position. He had it in mind to announce this on 17 September, although he would first need to discuss the financial implications with the Chancellor and Parliamentary business implications with the Lord President and the Chancellor of the Duchy. Mr. Edwards also drew the Prime Minister's attention to Mr. Evans' subsidiary demands. The Government could not be confident that Mr. Evans would immediately call off his hunger strike threat when this change of approach was announced.

The Prime Minister agreed with the course of action recommended by the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales.

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You will now no doubt wish to expedite consultations with other Ministers whose agreement is necessary before an announcement can be made. I would be grateful if you could keep us in touch with progress so that we can settle the detailed handling of the proposed announcement.

I am sending a copy of this letter to John Craig in the Welsh Office.

M. A. PATTISON

J.F. Halliday, Esq.,
Home Office.

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