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NORTHERN IRELAND

NOTE OF A DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HOME SECRETARY, THE DEFENCE SECRETARY AND THE LORD PRIVY SEAL AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON 28 AUGUST 1979 AT 1100

The Prime Minister said that she was aware of the concern which was being expressed by the Army in Northern Ireland over their lack of the powers which they considered necessary to defeat terrorism. The Government would have to consider deeply what their objectives in Northern Ireland really were. They would also have to consider how the Army could best be protected from the kind of tragedy which had befallen them on the previous day. The Prime Minister said that she was, however, now reinforced in the view which she had always held, namely that the key to the Northern Ireland problem lay in Dublin, with Mr. Lynch, and with the Pope.

The Secretary of State for Defence said that the Army was indeed unhappy, particularly about the security situation and intelligence co-ordination between themselves and the RUC. He was considering whether there might not be a case to appoint somebody to preside over the co-ordination of intelligence, under the Secretary of State's overall authority; whoever was appointed could remain permanently in Northern Ireland, rather than commuting between Westminster and Belfast. The difficulty was that somebody in this position might seem to be superior to the Secretary of State, even if he was in fact subordinate. The Lord Privy Seal expressed the view that a move of this kind would amount to no more than window dressing. The Prime Minister commented that it could also reflect adversely on the Secretary of State's authority. The Home Secretary thought that the appointment of a "security controller" would raise as many problems as it could solve, not least in terms of the appointee's relationship with the Secretary of State. The fact that he would not be responsible to the House of Commons would also raise problems. Mr. Whitelaw said that he nevertheless had the impression that intelligence co-ordination in Northern Ireland was now inadequate: he could not understand the deterioration

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which had taken place, since co-ordination in this field had been excellent at the time of his own involvement in the Province. The trouble seemed to be that the Army did not regard the RUC as being equal to the situation while the RUC disliked the Army behaving as policemen. Sir Ian Gilmour commented that the situation seemed to have got worse since the decision had been taken to push the RUC to the fore and to give the Army a lower profile.

On the security situation in general, Mr. Whitelaw said that the Army had defeated one enemy but now faced a new and more formidable one. The new cellular IRA was much more difficult to penetrate than the old IRA brigades. Sir Ian Gilmour asked whether the present opportunity could not be taken to insist on improved cross-border co-operation on the part of the Irish Government. The Irish should be persuaded to agree to free transit backwards and forwards across the border by helicopters; and there should be better co-operation between the British Army and the Garda. *

* Mr. Pym agreed that this was a good time to make a comprehensive approach to Mr. Lynch. Mr. Whitelaw suggested that he should be invited to come to London. There was general agreement that this should be done, and that if Mr. Lynch were to be invited to attend Lord Mountbatten's funeral he could come to see the Prime Minister at the same time. Sir Ian Gilmour pointed out that Mr. Lynch had already invited the Prime Minister to visit Dublin to discuss EEC matters: it would have to be made clear that the purpose of an earlier meeting in London would be quite different.

Mr. Whitelaw said that it would be necessary to prepare the Government's position very thoroughly on the extradition issue. Mr. Lynch invariably took refuge in the argument that in order to change the Irish law a referendum would be necessary and that the Government might lose it. The Prime Minister said that it was now clear that Ireland was harbouring known murderers.

~ Passage deleted and closed, 40 years,
under a FOI Exemption.

AWayland
25 March 2010

/Mr. Whitelaw

Mr. Whitelaw said that, in the view of Sir David McNee, the Government would be justified in publishing the photographs of known terrorists who were being given refuge in the South. The Prime Minister said that she would need to have the Lord Chancellor's and the Attorney General's advice on this. The steps taken to apprehend Lord Mountbatten's murderers would be a good test of Irish intentions.

Concluding the discussion, the Prime Minister repeated that the Government must reflect on what its objectives in Northern Ireland were and whether they justified the present tragic level of loss of life. The Government must define the problem and their aims. It was agreed that the press should be told that the Prime Minister had met some of her Ministerial colleagues in order to have a preliminary discussion of recent events in Northern Ireland, in advance of the Secretary of State's return to London later in the day.

The discussion ended at 12 noon.

SM.

28 August 1979