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File 100/1000

Come to Dales
Breakley



10 Downing Street
Whitehall

11 September 1975

Dear Mr.

Mrs. Thatcher's Call on the Prime Minister on
10 September

As you know, Mrs. Thatcher, accompanied by Mr. Airey Neave, called on the Prime Minister in the House of Commons at 5.45 p.m. yesterday evening for a talk on the current situation in Northern Ireland. The call arose from a suggestion put forward by your Secretary of State when he spoke to the Prime Minister on the telephone on 8 September. Mr. Merlyn Rees was present, except for the first few minutes of the talk. Unfortunately, I had to be absent myself for a part of the meeting, and the following does not, therefore, purport to be a full record.

The Prime Minister explained to Mrs. Thatcher that his intention on 8 September in inviting her to call was to give her the background to events in Northern Ireland at a point when it looked as though the Chief Justice might manage to pull something off and when there appeared to be some hope that the S.D.L.P. might accept the idea of select committees, without full acceptance of the idea of power-sharing, but nevertheless accepting the principle of coalition for up to three or five years ahead. The vote in the U.U.U.C. had followed and it was still not entirely clear what the respective positions of Mr. Paisley and Mr. Craig would be. The Secretary of State said that Mr. Craig looked as though he would now be a moderating influence. He thought that within the next two weeks we would be able to see where the Convention was going, although it could last until November and even continue for a further three months thereafter, although the Convention members would not receive any pay for that period, without renewed parliamentary approval. It was clear from all the reports coming out of the Convention so far that they did not want integration and were still in favour of devolved government. He thought that this might be a factor which would pull the Convention back from a breakdown. The Prime Minister said that the Government still wanted an Ulster solution, and that there was nothing which the Government ought to be doing at present. It was wrong to regard the present situation as a breakdown and Government policy was to allow the Convention to exhaust their timetable. If the Convention decided that they should remain in session for a further three months, they would certainly have the Government's blessing.

The Secretary of State

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The Secretary of State said that the Irish press were bound to continue to talk about a British pull-out from Northern Ireland, but this was nonsense. The Prime Minister said that we could never give in to I.R.A. wishes in this way, since they represented only a very small minority of public opinion in Ireland. In reply to a remark by the Secretary of State, Mrs. Thatcher expressed surprise that Mr. Enoch Powell should be in favour of integration and asked whether he had any significant influence on Irish opinion. The Secretary of State said that he certainly had some pull with Irish politicians (and Mr. Airey Neave agreed), but not with the community at large. It remained to be seen whether Mr. Craig could recover from his recent set-back. Mrs. Thatcher said that, as she understood it, the present position was that everything was still in play and must stay in play until all steps had been exhausted. Ireland was a place where the unexpected could always happen, but how much longer could the situation drag on? She agreed that, so long as the Convention existed, the Government should not make any move until it had to. It was a question of conjecture on how one interpreted Mr. Craig's position and Mr. Harry West's absence from the recent vote.

The Secretary of State said that there was undoubtedly a power struggle going on between Mr. Craig and the Reverend Ian Paisley. The Ulster Workers Council (U.W.C.) had asked to see him, but he had been advised by his officials against it, and to see the co-ordinating committee, which supported Mr. Craig, instead. Mr. Paisley was now in charge of the U.W.C. and there was evidently strong inter-factional argument going on. A recent incident in which two members of the UDA had been shot was almost certainly the work of the UVF.

Mr. Airey Neave raised the question of his forthcoming visit to Northern Ireland, and said that he did not want to make things more difficult. Would the Prime Minister advise him to see the leaders of the main Parties? The Prime Minister said that there was no objection to doing this in their capacity as politicians, but not as members of the Convention. Mr. Airey Neave accepted this, and interpreted the Prime Minister's advice as being to keep off Convention business during his visit.

The Secretary of State then gave a general account of the security situation and the origin of the ceasefire. The IRA had reached a situation at the end of last year where they realised that they had reached the end of the road and were not going to win, and had indicated to a group of clergymen in Northern Ireland that they were ready for a ceasefire. The Secretary of State also explained his policy on detention, and told Mrs. Thatcher that although Sinn Fein had made contacts with the Government, nothing had been done which had not been reported to the House of Commons. He could assure Mrs. Thatcher that no "deal" had been done on anything at all.

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The problem of lack of control by the IRA was increasing daily. In South Armagh, subversive elements were acting independently, although it was at least possible that the IRA had given them encouragement to do so. The IRA Officials, who were mainly Irish Marxists, had had a ceasefire for some 3 years. The IRSP, however, was a Trotskyist breakaway group who had attracted to them certain ex-Provisionals who were chafing at the ceasefire. The Prime Minister commented that some of the assassinations of Official IRA members had taken place without the Provisionals being involved at all. In his view, the sudden arrest of David O'Connell by the Irish Government had removed the one person who was able to exert tight control at the top, and who was determined, for whatever reason, to maintain the ceasefire.

The Secretary of State said that he was more worried by the current sectarian murders than by the bombings in Belfast. Unfortunately there were certain elements in the police who were very close to the UVF, and who were prepared to hand over information, for example, to Mr. Paisley. The Army's judgement was that the UDR were heavily infiltrated by extremist Protestants, and that in a crisis situation they could not be relied on to be loyal.

The Secretary of State then referred to the statement which the Army had put out that day in Northern Ireland about Seamus Twomey. He explained that no people had been detained since February, and that detention was strictly a matter for himself as Secretary of State, as it had been for Mr. Whitelaw. The aim of widespread detentions had been to break up the active service units, and they had been operated as a "revolving system". The process of house to house visits had led to a total of about 600 detentions by the end of last year, at the expense of the sympathy of the Irish Government and the Catholic hierarchy. The Prime Minister said that the Church leaders who had called on him at the New Year had confirmed that the effect of the ceasefire in Northern Ireland had been magical.

The Prime Minister added that the RUC were now much more successful than before at getting people before the Courts. He had no doubt that the desire of the mass of the Catholic population for peace had contributed to this. Mrs. Thatcher asked whether more intelligence was becoming available following the ceasefire, or less? She presumed that the new factor of intra-sectarian strife was preventing some intelligence getting through. The Secretary of State said that if there was a return to full scale warfare, he might have to go back to the earlier policy of breaking up the active units. In response to a question from Mrs. Thatcher, he confirmed that we knew the identity of at least the main leaders and organisers of those units. He added that, even though the arrest of wanted offenders was now a matter for the Courts, he was still liable to be blamed for everything.

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The Prime Minister said that the police in Northern Ireland were of a much better calibre now than they had been previously, and that Mr. Whitelaw had been responsible for starting this improvement. The current Police Chief was due to retire next year and Scotland Yard had a good potential successor for him. There had also been improvements in the mechanical organisation of police work in Northern Ireland.

After asking whether it was still a criminal offence to be a member of a proscribed organisation, Mrs. Thatcher said she understood that this was no longer a matter for detention under the Secretary of State's authority, and that cases of this sort would have to go through the Courts. The Secretary of State confirmed that this was so. Mrs. Thatcher asked nevertheless whether there was nothing in the Act to ensure against the risk of the authorities becoming a laughing stock, if someone like Seamus Twomey were to deny flatly that he was a member of such an organisation. The Secretary of State said that it was very difficult to make accusations of membership stick in the Courts, compared with the situation in Southern Ireland where the police had merely to say that they had reason to believe that the accused was a member of the IRA. There was also the problem that arrests for membership only exacerbated the difficulties we were facing over the shortage of space in the prisons in Northern Ireland. Mrs. Thatcher said that she understood this, but that it was also a political problem. The Prime Minister added that, at the time of the burning of the Maze Prison, there had also been a problem of a shortage of warders. The Secretary of State said that recruitment to the prison service had recently shot up by leaps and bounds, but that the accommodation problem still remained. He mentioned that Mr. Whitelaw had started the system of special category prisoners and he would have done the same. But he wanted soon to announce the end of special category status for new prisoners and would keep in touch on this with Mr. Airey Neave. The difficulty was that no parole system existed in Northern Ireland and it was essential to find some way of reducing the prison population. The Prime Minister said that in effect this might mean letting the common criminals such as shoplifters out rather earlier than might otherwise have been the case. Mrs. Thatcher said that presumably an announcement of the end of special category prisoners would depend on the outcome of the Convention, since it was a very political decision.

In conclusion, the Secretary of State said that the new General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland had said that the situation was much improved. Mrs. Thatcher said that her impression was that the Army were not now getting the intelligence which they had previously received. The Secretary of State acknowledged that this was so in terms of necessary intelligence for waging an urban guerrilla campaign, but many of the murders now being committed could be traced back to one gun. Mrs. Thatcher commented that, if our intelligence was good, no doubt that one gun could be picked up.

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Mrs. Thatcher asked whether the recent bombing at the Hilton Hotel was the work of a splinter group. It did not sound like the classic work of the IRA. The Secretary of State said that this was a matter for the Home Secretary, to whom he had spoken. Sinn Fein had fervently denied responsibility but it was clearly the work of either a breakaway group or the IRA. The answer was probably that both Caterham and the Hilton looked like the work of a breakaway organisation although the only thing that distinguished the Hilton bombing from old style IRA activity was that no code word had been given.

Mrs. Thatcher said that every politician on both sides of the House received letters asking why we did not pull out of Northern Ireland. People unfortunately did not realise that the result of a pull out would be much greater carnage here. The Conservative Party understood the need to protect innocent people in all parts of the United Kingdom, even if this was not widely appreciated elsewhere. The Prime Minister agreed and said that any impression that the Government were taking the line that the Irish could cut their own throats would immediately give the appearance that we had given in to the IRA.

The meeting ended at about 7.00 pm. Before leaving, Mrs. Thatcher agreed that the Press should be told that this had been a routine meeting to review the situation in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister confirmed his agreement that Mrs. Thatcher should give Mr. Whitelaw an account of the discussion.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Richard Dales (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Chris Brearley (Cabinet Office).

P. R. H. WRIGHT

Ken Jordan, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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