

CONFIDENTIAL

SUBJECT

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RECORD OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION, MR. MICHAEL FOOT, AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON 14 MAY 1981 AT 2025 HOURS

Present

The Prime Minister
Secretary of State for
Northern Ireland
Mr. Ian Gow
Mr. Michael Alexander

Mr. Michael Foot
Mr. Roy Hattersley
Mr. Don Concannon

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Mr. Foot and the Prime Minister agreed at the outset that while the fact of the meeting should not be denied, its subject matter should remain absolutely private. Spokesmen should say no more than that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition met from time to time to discuss Parliamentary and other business.

Mr. Foot said that his request for a meeting with the Prime Minister had arisen from discussions which he had had earlier with Mr. John Hume and others. All accepted that there could be no question of political status for hunger strikers and other PIRA prisoners. The question was whether any arrangement could be found on the basis of meeting one or two of the five demands which would relieve the Government of the accusation that it was being intransigent. (Mr. Foot referred to this as "a false charge".) Mr. Foot then read from the attached paper which he left with the Prime Minister at the end of the meeting.

Mr. Foot said that if the Government proceeded in this way, the PIRA would no doubt claim a great victory. This would not be justified. The Government would be able to demonstrate as much by referring to the three demands which had been rejected. Of course there was a risk that the PIRA might continue to insist on the other three demands but given the advantages of bringing the strike to an end, this risk should be run.

/ The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister said that the hunger strikers could bring the strike to an end at any time. Mr. Foot agreed but added that he was looking for concessions which would "enable them to call it off"; or, failing that, put the onus for the continuation of the present situation on them. This was what Mr. Hume had been saying. In Mr. Foot's view, it would be advisable to put his proposition to the hunger strikers. The dangers of the present situation were very great. The Government should try to find a means of escaping from it.

The Prime Minister said she was amazed by what Mr. Foot had had to say. The report made by the European Commission on Human Rights last year had been implemented in full. That report had not proposed free association. The reaction of the prison staff to such a proposal was easy to imagine. None the less, the Government had gone further than recommended by the Commission on Human Rights. Despite heavy criticism, they had decided the previous autumn to issue civilian clothes to conforming prisoners. There was now a thoroughly liberal regime being applied in modern prisons. The Government intended to stick on this point. In any case, the hunger strikers and their representatives had repeatedly underlined their insistence on the five demands being met in full. There was no question of the Government acting as Mr. Foot proposed.

Mr. Foot repeated that he did not dispute what the Prime Minister had said. The Opposition had not criticised the Government. On the contrary, they had supported them. However, the dangers of the present situation could not be disregarded. It was essential to consider whether there might not be an escape route. If the Prime Minister was right about the five demands - and what Sands had said to Mr. Concannon suggested that she might be - the offer of a concession on two demands would be rejected and that would be the end of the matter. However, if the Prime Minister was wrong, then a way out would have been found.

/ The Secretary of State