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19 MAY 1981

Mr. Dabell

*Handwritten signature*  
Mr. T. Hughes 26/5

RECORD OF A DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND MR JOHN HUME  
AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON 13 APRIL 1981 AT 2200 HOURS

Present: Prime Minister  
Secretary of State for  
Northern Ireland  
Mr. Michael Alexander

Mr. John Hume

① Mr. Mopkins.  
② cc for info  
PS/Secs (3)  
PS/Mr. Hume (has)  
PS/PS (has)  
Mr. Marshall  
Mr. Blalock  
Mr. Palmer  
Mr. Wyatt  
Mr. Moriarty  
Mr. Jackson  
Mr. Blatherwick  
Mr. Fisher

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Mr. Hume said that the situation in Northern Ireland was the worst he had ever known. The PIRA had planned the hunger strike well, choosing strikers who were from different regions in the Province and who represented different political strands of thought within the PIRA and the INLA. Anti British feeling in Northern Ireland was growing as was support for the PIRA. It was essential that there should be an initiative. There was no question of giving political status to the hunger strikers. But something could and should be done within the five demands. There need be no sacrifice of principle. Either the initiative would succeed, which would be a great victory for the Government, or it would fail in which case the Government would still have won the initiative from the PIRA.

Mr. Hume recalled that before Christmas he had talks with the NIO about an initiative involving the prisoners being allowed to wear their own clothes and being given the right of limited association. He had been told then by the hunger strikers that they would guarantee to call off the hunger strike if these concessions were made. Both concessions could be extended to all prisoners in Northern Ireland and therefore need not imply special treatment. Women were already allowed to wear their own clothes and conforming prisoners already had some rights of

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What was at issue, under the latter heading, was the prisoners' activities before breakfast and at lunchtime.

As evidence for his assertion that concessions on clothing and freedom of association would end the hunger strike, Mr. Hume cited his contacts with the hunger strikers before Christmas; a message from a clergyman connected with the hunger strikers' families to the effect that action along the lines Mr. Hume had been advocating would "bring a definite response from the prisoners"; and a conversation he had had the previous day with Mr. Gerry Adams. Mr. Adams had asked what Mr. Hume would be proposing and, on being told <sup>had said</sup> that if the "substance" of the five points was granted, the hunger strikers would call off their protest. On being accused by Mr. Hume of always asking for more, Mr. Adams had said that the PIRA would make no demands beyond those already made as a price for ending the hunger strike. Mr. Adams had added that the PIRA were not interested in the suggestion that the European Commission on Human Rights might offer a way to end the hunger strike. He had added that Mr. Hume should not try to be seen to be negotiating on behalf of the prisoners. He had said, finally, that it was of no concern to the PIRA how we described any concession we made.

Mr. Hume said that on the basis of his conversation with Mr. Adams, and of the other two pieces of "evidence" he had cited, he was confident that action along the lines which he had proposed would do the trick. He was not seeking any credit from the affair. The Government could simply announce that it was renewing its efforts to implement the proposals made before Christmas with one or two additional features. There need be no intermediary or other involvement.

The Prime Minister pointed out that Sands, Hughes and Hughes' brother, An Phoblacht and indeed Adams, as reported by Mr. Hume, were all asking that the five demands should be met in full.

/ She resented.

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She resented the accusation that it was the Government who were being inflexible. Everything recommended by the Commission on Human Rights in its 1980 Report had been implemented. And beyond that the decision to issue civilian clothing to conforming prisoners had been made. We had incurred criticism for that decision. It now formed part of what was a particularly humane régime. The media had been into the Maze more than once and had been able to find nothing to criticise in the facilities. What the prisoners made of those facilities was, of course, their business.

Contrary to Mr. Hume's assertion, the Government were not on a hook. Sands and Hughes had both been guilty of <sup>the</sup> deaths of innocent people. The Government's flexibility before the hunger strike began had not impressed them. Everyone had asked them to give up the hunger strike. No-one would be better pleased than the Government if the present hunger strikers gave up. But the Government was not prepared to be the victim of salami tactics. They would not treat murderers as prisoners of war. Freedom of association would be merely a step towards that status. The people who had been killed by the PIRA had had no choice. The hunger strikers had a choice.

Mr. Hume asked whether the Prime Minister recognised the gravity of the situation and whether she was going to do anything about it. The emotional overtones of the hunger strike were enormous. The present situation was the result of fundamental political instability and was getting worse. The Prime Minister said that the Government's job was to protect law abiding citizens. Any wavering on the issue of political status would be to give a licence to kill. The present crisis was the result of the reluctance of some people to accept the ballot box as a means of resolving their disagreements. Mr. Hume said that if this was all the Prime Minister had to say, the problems for Northern Ireland would be serious indeed. He did not expect to be around to help find solutions. He would be "swept away" in the disturbances.

/ The Prime Minister



The Prime Minister said that the Government would place no obstacles in the way of the European Commission on Human Rights. They would do everything to facilitate investigation of any complaint made under the Commission's Terms of Reference. They would do so in the same spirit as that in which they had allowed the media into the Maze and other prisons. The Government had nothing to hide. Mr. Hume said that the hunger strike was not about prison conditions. It was about a political problem. The PIRA held the stage. So long as they were allowed to do so, their support would grow. Eventually the Government would not be able to control matters. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that Mr. Hume's argument was in effect that if six or ten people were tough enough, there was nothing the Government could do to stop them achieving their objectives. Mr. Hume said that he had tried to persuade the hunger strikers to desist but had failed. The fact was that it was now more difficult for the hunger strikers to end the strike than to proceed with it. It was essential that some political initiative should be taken. He had been campaigning for next week's local elections; none of the electors were interested in anything but the hunger strike.

The Prime Minister repeated that she was willing to see the European Commission on Human Rights involved. She was not however prepared to see the hunger strikers treated as political prisoners, which was what they wanted. Mr. Hume asked how political status should be defined. The Prime Minister said that if the five demands were met, the hunger strikers would have that status. It would be impossible for the prisons to be administered as at present. The prison staff would refuse to do so. She, like Mr. Haughey, had never ceased to argue for peace and reconciliation but she was not prepared to grant prisoner of war status. Mr. Hume asked whether the steps he had proposed would be regarded as granting political status. The Prime Minister said they would be steps towards that status. Mr. Hume said that the Prime Minister should

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remember the problem was one of nationalism. This was now on the increase. The Irish Government, under De Valera had shot men convicted of IRA outrages. The British could never do this. The Prime Minister said Mr. Hume was asking for total surrender. To give political status would be to act as a recruiting sergeant for the PIRA. Mr. Hume said that the PIRA were in any case gaining support "hand over fist". They were winning the propaganda battle. If HMG were to take the initiative they could reduce the hunger strikers to their true status as men of violence. There would of course be risks in taking an initiative but the cost of inaction would be greater. Polarisation in the community was growing. The hatred of Dr. Paisley in the Catholic community was increasing rapidly. Initially his recent activities had not been treated seriously. But now the frustration was apparent. The divisions in the community would, of course, be shown up in the elections next Wednesday.

The discussion ended at 2310 hours.

*And*

14 May 1981

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