W.M. (40) 140th CONCLUSIONS,
Confidential Annex.
(26th May, 1940 - 2.0 p.m.)

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he did not think that M. Reynaud would object to the British Expeditionary Force being ordered to march to the coast, although this matter had not yet been finally settled with him. 

The Prime Minister then gave an account of M. Reynaud's discussion with him over lunch.

M. Reynaud had given an expose of France's position. Apart from the troops in the Maginot Line, including the fortress troops, the French had 50 divisions between Metz and the coast. Against these the Germans could put 150 divisions. The French Ministers had asked General Weygand for his views on the position. They would defend Paris as long as possible, but if Paris was taken they would retire to the south-west. General Weygand had made it clear, however, that the Germans with their superiority of numbers and tanks, could pierce the line and pass through it. While he would obey orders and fight it out as long as he was told to do so, and would be prepared to go down fighting for the honour of the Flag, he did not think that France's resistance was likely to last very long against a determined German onslaught.

The French Ministers therefore concluded that, with 50 divisions against 150, it was clear that the war could not be won on land. On sea we had good fleets which had established a superiority over Germany; but if Germany had command of resources from Brest to Vladivostok it did not look as though the blockade could win the war. It was clear that this country would take a long time to build up a big army, and that we could not make a big effort in 1941 on land.

This left the Air. If the Germans took Paris they would have the air factories in that neighbourhood, as well as those in Belgium and Holland.

What of the United States of America? The munitions industry in that country was feeble.

\* A copy of the message finally sent from M. Reynaud to General Weygand is attached.
Where, then, could France look for salvation? Someone had suggested that a further approach should be made to Italy. This would release 1 French divisions. There were said to be a number of people in Italy, such as Grandi and Balbo, and the like, who thought that to stab France in the back when she was in a mortal struggle with Germany was rather too like the action which Russia had taken in regard to Poland.

If an approach was made to Italy, what sort of terms would Italy ask? Probably the neutralisation of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, the demilitarisation of Malta, and the limitation of naval forces in the Mediterranean. Some alteration in the status of Tunis would also be asked for, and the Dodecanese (sic) would have to be put right. The Prime Minister said that he had not understood what was meant by this.

Apparently the French suggestion was that the offer of such terms might keep Italy out of the war.

M. Reynaud realised that the Germans would probably not keep any terms which they agreed to. He had hinted that he himself would not sign peace terms imposed upon France, but that he might be forced to resign, or might feel that he ought to resign.

The Prime Minister said that he had then put the other side of the case, and suggested that as soon as the situation in North-eastern France had been cleared up, the Germans would make no further attacks on the French line and would immediately start attacking this country. M. Reynaud thought that the dream of all Germans was to conquer Paris, and that they would march on Paris.

The Prime Minister had said that we were not prepared to give in on any account. We would rather go down fighting than be enslaved to Germany. But in any case we were confident that we had a good chance of surviving the German onslaught. France, however, must stay in the war. If only we could stick things out for another three months, the position would be entirely different. He had asked M. Reynaud if any peace terms had been offered to him. M. Reynaud had said "No," but that they knew they could get an offer if they wanted one. He repeated that General Weygand was prepared to fight on, but could hold out no hope that France had sufficient power of resistance.

The Prime Minister said that he suggested that the Foreign Secretary should now go over and see M. Reynaud, who was at Admiralty House, and that he himself, the Lord President of the Council and the Lord Privy Seal should come over a few minutes later.

A short further discussion ensued on whether we should make any approach to Italy.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY favoured this course, and thought that the last thing that Signor Mussolini wanted was to see Herr Hitler dominating Europe. He would be anxious, if he could, to persuade Herr Hitler to take a more reasonable attitude.
THE PRIME MINISTER doubted whether anything would come of an approach to Italy, but said that the matter was one which the War Cabinet would have to consider.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO said that if we could maintain the struggle for some further weeks he thought that we could make use of our economic power in regard to raw materials, textiles, and oil. Stocks in Germany were very depleted. In any event, he hoped that France would take steps to see that valuable stocks and manufacturing capacity in France did not fall into German hands.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he thought the only point to be settled that day was that General Weygand should be instructed (to persuade M. Reynaud) to issue orders for the B.E.F. to march to the coast. It was important to make sure that the French had no complaint against us on the score that, by cutting our way to the coast, we were letting them down militarily. At the same time it was important that the orders for the march to the coast should be issued as soon as possible. He asked the Secretary of State for War to prepare a draft telegram for despatch, which should be brought over to Admiralty House at 3.15 p.m.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL mentioned the possibility of using smoke to mask the re-embarkation of our troops and of material.

After M. Reynaud's departure, an informal Meeting of War Cabinet Ministers was held in Admiralty House.

This record does not cover the first quarter of an hour of the discussion, during which the Secretary was not present.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that we were in a different position from France. In the first place, we still had powers of resistance and attack, which they had not. In the second place, they would be likely to be offered decent terms by Germany, which we should not. If France could not defend herself, it was better that she should get out of the war rather than that she should drag us into a settlement which involved intolerable terms. There was no limit to the terms which Germany would impose upon us if she had her way. From one point of view, he would rather France was out of the war before she was broken up, and retained the position of a strong neutral whose factories could not be used against us.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL said that Herr Hitler was working to a time-limit, and he had to win by the end of the year.
THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought
that he would have to win by the beginning of the
winter.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL said that if France now
went out of the war, Herr Hitler would be able to turn
on us the sooner.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he hoped that
France would hang on. At the same time we must take
care not to be forced into a weak position in which
we went to Signor Mussolini and invited him to go to
Herr Hitler and ask him to treat us nicely. We must
not get entangled in a position of that kind before
we had been involved in any serious fighting.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that he did not
disagree with this view, but that he attached perhaps
rather more importance than the Prime Minister to the
desirability of allowing France to try out the
possibilities of European equilibrium. He was not
quite convinced that the Prime Minister's diagnosis
was correct and that it was in Herr Hitler's interest
to insist on outrageous terms. After all, he knew
his own internal weaknesses. On this lay-out it might
be possible to save France from the wreck. He would
not like to see France subjected to the Gestapo.

THE PRIME MINISTER did not think that Germany
was likely to attempt this in regard to France.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that he was not
so sure.

Continuing, the Foreign Secretary thought
that we might say to Signor Mussolini that if there was
any suggestion of terms which affected our independence,
we should not look at them for a moment. If, however,
Signor Mussolini was as alarmed as we felt that he
must be in regard to Herr Hitler's power, and was
prepared to look at matters from the point of view of
the balance of power, then we might consider Italian
claims. At any rate, he could see no harm in trying
this line of approach.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO thought that
we should soon get to the point at which demands were
made which affected the security of the British Empire.
But he saw no objection to this line of approach being
tried. He doubted, however, whether it was within
Signor Mussolini's power to take a line independent of
Herr Hitler.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought
that Signor Mussolini could only take an independent
line if Herr Hitler was disposed to conform to the line
which Signor Mussolini indicated. The problem was a
very difficult one, and it was right to talk it out
from every point of view.
M. Reynaud wanted us to say to Signor Mussolini that if he did not come into the war against us we were prepared to do a deal with him in regard to certain named places. We were not prepared to accept that proposition as it stood. For one thing, the only advantage we should get was that France would be able to move away the ten divisions now on the Italian front. Signor Mussolini would get something for nothing, and what was offered would be only the starting-point for new demands.

Another method of approach would be if the French told Signor Mussolini, that he must consider the future of Europe, including his own future. Italy was in no safer position that any other country. If Signor Mussolini was prepared to collaborate with us in getting tolerable terms, then we would be prepared to discuss Italian demands with him.

M. Reynaud, however, had thought that Signor Mussolini would not deal on these lines, but would want a specific offer made to him.

The Prime Minister had said that it was undesirable that France should be in a position to say that we had stood between her and a tolerable settlement.

He referred to the Prime Minister's statement that we might be better off without France. That meant, provided we could obtain safeguards on particular points, this was certainly a point of view which deserved serious consideration.

The Prime Minister thought that it was best to decide nothing until we saw how much of the Army we could re-embark from France. The operation might be a great failure. On the other hand, our troops might well fight magnificently, and we might save a considerable portion of the Force. A good deal of the re-embarkation would be carried out by day. This would afford a real test of air superiority, since the Germans would attempt to bomb the ships and boats.

The Lord Privy Seal thought that Germany might well attempt some diversion against this country while we were engaged in re-embarking the Force.

The Foreign Secretary then explained the position in regard to the approach to Italy. He read out the joint communication which we had made with the French to the United States (See Telegrams No.198 DIPP to Paris, dated 24.5.40 and 887 DIPP to Washington, dated 25.5.40). It was not certain what action, if any, President Roosevelt would take on this demarche.

The Foreign Secretary then read out an account of the interview which he had had with the Italian Ambassador the previous day (See Despatch to Rome No. 418).
THE PRIME MINISTER said that his general comment on the suggested approach to Signor Mussolini was that it implied that if we were prepared to give Germany back her colonies and to make certain concessions in the Mediterranean, it was possible for us to get out of our present difficulties. He thought that no such option was open to us. For example, the terms offered would certainly prevent us from completing our re-armament.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that, if so, the terms would be refused, but he felt sure that Signor Mussolini must feel in a most uncomfortable position.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that Herr Hitler thought that he had the whip hand. The only thing to do was to show him that he could not conquer this country. If, on M. Reynaud's showing, France could not continue, we must part company. At the same time, he did not raise objection to some approach being made to Signor Mussolini.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY then read to the War Cabinet the draft which had been discussed that afternoon with M. Reynaud. M. Reynaud had wished to add some precise details, but had been willing to drop this suggestion.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO thought that Signor Mussolini would be out to get Malta, Gibraltar and Suez. He felt sure that the negotiations would break down; but Herr Hitler would get to know of them, and it might have a bad effect on our prestige.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought that he would make some extra demands on us; as, for example, Somaliland, Kenya, or Uganda.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY thought that this was a good argument against mentioning particular matters in the approach.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought that Signor Mussolini would say that he knew what he wanted, but was only prepared to deal as part of a general settlement.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY thought that if we got to the point of discussing the terms of a general settlement and found that we could obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence, we should be foolish if we did not accept them.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO said that the discussions contemplated would take some time. Meanwhile, France would be getting into a worse position. If Paris was likely to be taken within a short time, was there really any chance that negotiations would serve any purpose?
Belgium:

Message from Sir Roger Keyes.

During the latter part of this discussion the Prime Minister was called out of the room to speak to Sir Roger Keyes, who had a message from the King of the Belgians. The King was determined to stay with his Army. There was, perhaps, a chance that he might be persuaded to leave at the last minute. The Belgians were determined to act as the left flank to assist our re-embarkation. Sir Roger Keyes said there was still nothing in Ostend to prevent it being taken. The Menin Gate was being shelled that afternoon. He had been at Lord Gort’s headquarters when orders had come to march to the coast. It was clear that these orders had been received with acclamation at G.H.Q., where it was held that the march to the South held out no prospect of success.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL asked what information should be given to the Dominions.

THE PRIME MINISTER thought that nothing should be said to them in regard to the discussions with M. Reynaud. At the same time, they should be told that we had now obtained the formal assent of the French Government to falling back on the coast, and that the position was a serious one.

In connection with the previous discussion, the LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that the Chiefs of Staff’s Report on “British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality” (W.P.(40) 168) had referred to the desirability of getting hold of Berehaven. He (the Lord President) was seeing the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs that afternoon, and he thought that Sir John Maffey should be told to see Mr. de Valera in order to explain to him how serious the position was and how important it was that we should be able to occupy Berehaven again in the near future.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY again raised the question of getting the Northern Ireland Government into some kind of relation with the Government of Eire.

*Circulated as W.P. (40) 170.*
THE LORD PRESIDENT said that he had seen Lord Craigavon, who had said that he would do whatever was asked. He had no objection to his people getting together with the representatives of Eire and discussing matters. The difficulty was that defence was a reserved subject, and that discussions on local matters were already taking place between the Northern Ireland Police and the Eire Police. In these circumstances the Lord President said that he had found it difficult to know what further specific suggestion he could make to Lord Craigavon.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.
Telegram to General Weygand.

The reports received here from the Front indicate that the offensive from the North cannot succeed in closing the gap in view of the fact that the offensive from the South cannot be launched in sufficient strength to join up with it.

I have told the British Government that you have given General Blanchard full freedom of decision.

I think that it would be very desirable that you should inform General Blanchard at once, that you authorise him formally to order a withdrawal towards the ports. Please inform Sir Edmund Ironside of your decision.

PAUL REYNAUD.
Les rapports reçus ici du front indiquent que l'offensive partant du Nord ne peut réussir à combler le vide en raison du fait que l'offensive partant du Sud ne peut être déclanchée avec suffisamment de puissance pour rejoindre la première.

J'ai dit au gouvernement anglais que vous avez laissé le général Blanchard libre de sa décision.

Je crois qu'il serait très désirable que vous faissiez savoir immédiatement au général Blanchard que vous l'autorisez formellement à ordonner la retraite vers les ports. Veuillez informer Sir Edmund Ironside de votre décision.

PAUL REYNAUD.
Cypher telegram to The Marquess of Lothian (Washington)

Foreign Office 25th May, 1940. 7.30 p.m.

No. 887 DIPP.

MOST IMMEDIATE

My telegram to Paris No. 198 [of May 24th: possible approach to Italy].

French Government concur and are instructing French Ambassador in Washington in this sense so soon as Monsieur Daladier has enlisted support of United States Ambassador in Paris which he has, we understand, done today. Please therefore approach the President at once in the sense of my telegram under reference. You need not wait until your French colleague has received instructions.

Repeated to Paris 206, Rome 471.
OUTWARD TELEGRAM

SPECIAL DISTRIBUTION AND WAR CABINET.

TO: FRANCE.

Cypher telegram to Sir R. Campbell, (Paris).

Foreign Office. 24th May, 1940. 7.40 p.m.

No. 198. DIPP.

HOST IMMEDIATE.

Your telegrams Nos. 241 [of May 21st], 255 and 262 [both of May 23rd. possible approach to Italy].

The idea now put forward by the French Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs viz. to approach Signor Mussolini through the President of the United States is welcome to His Majesty's Government, who have themselves been contemplating the possibility of taking action in this sense. His Majesty's Government would see no objection to an enquiry being addressed to Signor Mussolini on the lines suggested in paragraph 2 of your telegram No. 262, provided that this was done on the President's own responsibility.

2. At the same time it would be useful, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government, if President Roosevelt were to convey to Signor Mussolini the sense of the last two paragraphs of the statement we had in mind to make concerning Italy (see my telegram No. 406 to Rome action on which has been suspended), omitting the question of contraband control which, as Your Excellency knows, is now being dealt with separately in Rome through the Master of the Rolls. In other words, we would suggest that the President might inform Signor Mussolini that "he had reason to believe that the following represented the attitude of the Allied Governments":-

That the Allied Governments

(a) were aware that the Italian Government entertains certain grievances in regard to the Italian position in the Mediterranean,

(b) were prepared to consider reasonable Italian claims at the end of the war,

(c) would welcome Italy's participation at the peace conference with a status equal to that of the belligerents.

3. This offer would be more attractive to the Italian Government if the United States Government could not only sponsor but guarantee it, and His Majesty's Government would accordingly suggest that the President should be asked to make the following statement in addition:

That the United States Government for their part would be prepared to guarantee the fulfilment of the Allied promise, but that they could only do so - thus ensuring that Italian claims would be dealt with as part of the general settlement of Europe - provided always that in the meantime Italy had not joined in the war against the Allies.
4. Please endeavour to obtain the early concurrence of the French Government in these proposals. So soon as I hear that they are in agreement, I would propose to telegraph to Washington in this sense, and would suggest that the French Government should take similar action.

Addressed to Paris No. 198 DIPP.

Repeated to Rome No. 463 and Washington No. 869.
Viscount Halifax to Sir P. Lorraine (Rome).

Sir E. Bridges.

Foreign Office, May 25, 1940.

I asked the Italian Ambassador to call this afternoon.

I told his Excellency that I wished to speak to him because I had reason to think that a misunderstanding had arisen with regard to the possibility of some statement being made by His Majesty's Government about the political issues between our two countries. It was quite true that we had intended to make an approach, in appropriate form, to certain political questions, following on the approach which we had made to questions concerning contraband control; and in any such approach we should have wished to make plain our desire that Italy should naturally take her proper place at a peace conference by the side of the belligerents. I had, however, hesitated to make the approach in question because of the discouraging nature of the reply which Signor Mussolini had sent through Count Ciano to a personal communication from the Prime Minister, which had led me to doubt whether any useful purpose would be served by our trying to define our position more closely to the Italian Government. In view, however, of the misunderstanding which seemed to have arisen, I wished to take the opportunity of saying that, while we fully recognised the special relations in which Italy stood to Germany, we had always been quite willing to discuss any questions between our two countries and to endeavour to reach solutions satisfactory to both sides. His Majesty's Government would be willing at any time to propose such a discussion to the Italian Government if we could have some assurance that we should not be rebuffed. If and when we should ever receive an indication that our approach might be received with due consideration, we should be prepared to carry the matter further and deal with it in greater detail. Personally I should hope, and I felt sure that this would be the view of His Majesty's Government, that the measure of success which we were in the way of achieving as regards the difficulties connected with contraband control might serve to open the way to the treatment of other questions, always provided that we could approach these questions on the basis of the frankest recognition of the rights and necessities of both parties.

I told his Excellency that I had thought that I ought to give him this message in order that I might feel, and perhaps his Excellency also, that, so far as we were concerned, nothing had been left undone that could help to avoid any misunderstanding, or something worse between our two countries.

Signor Bastianini thanked me very much for my communication. He said that he had no knowledge of the exchange of letters between Signor Mussolini and the Prime Minister, but that he would of course immediately pass on what I had said to his Government. It had, however, always been Signor Mussolini's view that the settlement of problems between Italy and any other country should be part of a general European settlement, and his Excellency asked me whether he might inform his Government that His Majesty's Government considered it opportune now to examine the questions at issue between our two countries within the larger framework of a European settlement.

I said that I had always thought, if any discussions were to be held with a view to solving European questions and building a peaceful Europe, that matters which caused anxiety to Italy must certainly be discussed as part of the general European settlement.

Whether or not it might be possible to bring matters, which caused anxiety to Italy, to solution while the war was still in progress would no doubt depend upon the nature of the issues raised, and upon the course which any discussions might take.

Signor Bastianini then said that he would like to know whether His Majesty's Government would consider it possible to discuss general questions involving not only Great Britain and Italy, but other countries. On my saying...
that it was difficult to visualise such wide discussions while the war was still proceeding, the Ambassador replied that once such a discussion were begun, war would be pointless.

8. Signor Mussolini, said the Ambassador, was interested in European questions—the Ambassador mentioned Poland—and was always concerned to build a European settlement, that would not merely be an armistice, but would protect European peace for a century. I said that the purpose of His Majesty’s Government was the same, and they would never be unwilling to consider any proposal made with authority that gave promise of the establishment of a secure and peaceful Europe. I added that I thought I could say that this would also be the attitude of the French Government.

9. The Ambassador warmly agreed with an observation that I had made to the effect that when we came to such discussions, Signor Mussolini would have an absolutely vital part to play. Signor Mussolini was always ready to help in securing a wider European settlement because he saw the solution of Italian problems only within the framework of the solution of all the problems of all other European countries.

10. His Excellency said that he would like to be able to inform Signor Mussolini that His Majesty’s Government did not exclude the possibility of some discussion of the wider problems of Europe in the event of the opportunity arising. This I told his Excellency he could certainly do, for plainly the secure peace in Europe that both Signor Mussolini and we desired to see established could only come by the finding through frank discussion of solutions that were generally acceptable and by the joint determination of the Great Powers to maintain them.

I am, &c.

HALIFAX.