ITALY:  
Suggested direct approach to Signor Mussolini.  

(Previous Reference: W.M.(40) 144th Conclusions, Minute 6.)  

(The Meeting was summoned to consider a message received from the French Government again proposing that a direct approach should be made to Italy by France and this country. 

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that it might be relevant to say that Sir Robert Vansittart had again seen the member of the Italian Embassy whose initiative had led to his (the Foreign Secretary's) talk with the Italian Ambassador. 

The Foreign Secretary said that he had thought that the interview had been very satisfactory from the Italian point of view. There was, however, reason to believe that the member of the Italian Embassy concerned had said that he (the Foreign Secretary) had made no advance, and that the position was hopeless. 

The Foreign Secretary said that Sir Robert Vansittart had now discovered what the Italian Embassy had in mind, namely, that we should give a clear indication that we should like to see mediation by Italy. 

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he was determined not to get into this position. 

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that the proposal which had been discussed with M. Reynaud on Sunday had been as follows: that we should say that we were prepared to fight to the death for our independence, but that, provided this could be secured, there were certain concessions that we were prepared to make to Italy. 

THE PRIME MINISTER thought that the French were trying to get us on to the slippery slope. The position would be entirely different when Germany had made an unsuccessful attempt to invade this country. 

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that
there could be no question of our making concessions to Italy while the war continued. The concessions which it was contemplated we might have to make, e.g., in regard to Malta and Gibraltar, would have to be part of a general settlement with Germany. No settlement with Italy which left Germany still at war would be of any value to us.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO said it was clear that Signor Mussolini would not be satisfied with the French offer. There was also the point that Herr Hitler might not want Italy in the War.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR said that on the previous day the War Cabinet had taken the line that nothing must be done to cut across President Roosevelt's approach. We had now learned that the President's approach had been ill-received.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that it did not necessarily follow that, because Signor Mussolini had not responded to President Roosevelt's approach, he would turn down an approach made by the French. It had been reported that Signor Mussolini had deeply resented President Roosevelt's interference.

Reference was made to public opinion in Italy. The view was expressed that, although a great many people in that country were opposed to war, they would almost certainly follow Signor Mussolini if he went to war.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL doubted whether Signor Mussolini intended to come into the war at the moment. He agreed with the Prime Minister's diagnosis that M. Reynaud wanted to get Signor Mussolini engaged in conversations. He would then try and turn those conversations into a Conference. If we rejected the terms offered, he would abuse us as he had abused the Belgians that morning.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO thought that if we agreed to the French making an approach on the lines proposed, and the discussion then took on a wider aspect, the integrity of our position would be seriously jeopardised.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY agreed that there was little prospect that anything would result from an approach on the lines suggested by the French. At the same time, the larger issue was also involved. Assuming that Signor Mussolini wished to play the part of mediator, and that he could produce terms which would not affect our independence, he thought that we ought to be prepared to consider such terms. He agreed, however, that this hypothesis was a most unlikely one.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR thought that there was no possible chance of acceptable terms being open to us at the present moment.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that we must not ignore the fact that we might get better terms before France went out of the war and our aircraft factories were bombed, than we might get in three months' time.
The various possibilities now under development of countering night-bombing were referred to.

The Prime Minister then read out a draft which expressed his views. To him the essential point was that M. Reynaud wanted to get us to the Conference-table with Herr Hitler. If we once got to the table, we should then find that the terms offered us touched our independence and integrity. When, at this point, we got up to leave the Conference-table, we should find that all the forces of resolution which were now at our disposal would have vanished. M. Reynaud had said that if he could save the independence of France, he would continue the fight. It was clear, therefore, that M. Reynaud's aim was to end the war.

The Lord President of the Council said that, while he agreed with this general diagnosis, it was important to understand the French position, and to frame the answer to the French in a way which would be convincing to them. He thought that the essential elements in the reply to M. Reynaud should be on the following lines: That we regarded the suggested offer contained in his letter as a not very substantial one, which opened up no real prospect of influencing Signor Mussolini's attitude. The only object likely to be achieved by offering these concessions was to induce Signor Mussolini to adopt the position of a mediator.

In our view, mediation at this stage, in the presence of a great disaster, and at a time when many people might think that we had no more resources left, could only have the most unfortunate results. We in this country felt that we had resources left to us of which we could make good use. If, as we believed, we could hold out, we should be able to obtain terms which would not affect our independence.

We concluded, therefore, that, without prejudice to the future, the present was not the time at which advances should be made to Signor Mussolini. If, however, both France and Great Britain continued to play their part in the struggle, we were likely to fare better than if we now allowed ourselves to become involved in negotiations with Signor Mussolini.

The Foreign Secretary said that M. Reynaud also wanted the Allies to address an appeal to the President of the United States.

The Prime Minister thought that a paragraph might be added to the draft outlined by the Lord President to the effect that we were ready in principle to associate ourselves with such an appeal.

The Minister without Portfolio thought that M. Reynaud was too much inclined to hawk round appeals. This was another attempt to run out.
THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought that M. Reynaud wanted President Roosevelt in negotiations as a counter to mediation by Signor Mussolini.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he came back to the point that the French wanted to get out of the war, but did not want to break their Treaty obligations to us. Signor Mussolini, if he came in as mediator, would take his whack out of us. It was impossible to imagine that Herr Hitler would be so foolish as to let us continue our re-armament. In effect, his terms would put us completely at his mercy. We should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, even if we were beaten, than were open to us now. If, however, we continued the war and Germany attacked us, no doubt we should suffer some damage, but they also would suffer severe losses. Their oil supplies might be reduced. A time might come when we felt that we had to put an end to the struggle, but the terms would not then be more mortal than those offered to us now.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that he still did not see what there was in the French suggestion of trying out the possibilities of mediation which the Prime Minister felt was so wrong.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL referred to paragraph 3 of W.P.(40)170. This represented the line which had been agreed with M. Reynaud in the conversations on Sunday. It was clear to the world that we were in a tight corner, and he did not see what we should lose if we said openly that, while we would fight to the end to preserve our independence, we were ready to consider decent terms if such were offered to us.

The Lord President said that, on a dispassionate survey, it was right to remember that the alternative to fighting on nevertheless involved a considerable gamble.

The War Cabinet agreed that this was a true statement of the case.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the nations which went down fighting rose again, but those which surrendered tamely were finished.

THE MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO said that any course which we took was attended by great danger. The line of resistance was certainly a gamble, but he did not feel that this was a time for ultimate capitulation.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that nothing in his suggestion could even remotely be described as ultimate capitulation.

THE PRIME MINISTER thought that the chances of decent terms being offered to us at the present time were a thousand to one against.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that it was our duty to look at the situation realistically. He felt bound to say that he was in agreement with the
Foreign Secretary in taking the view that if we thought it was possible that we could now get terms which, although grievous, would not threaten our independence, we should be right to consider such terms.

Again, looking at the matter realistically, he did not think it could be said that an approach to Signor Mussolini on the lines proposed by the French at the present time would be likely to produce an offer of decent terms, certainly not with Paris in Herr Hitler's grasp, but unoccupied. He therefore concluded that it was no good making an approach on the lines proposed by M. Reynaud at the present time. On the other hand, he thought that if we were not very careful as to the terms of our answer, France might give up the struggle at once. He did not want to give her any pretext for doing so.

General agreement was expressed with this view.

The Lord President of the Council added that, while he thought that an approach to Italy was useless at the present time, it might be that we should take a different view in a short time, possibly even a week hence. The real question was, therefore, how to frame a reply to the French which, without rejecting their idea altogether, would persuade them that this was the wrong time to make it.

The Lord Privy Seal said that it was necessary to pay regard to public opinion in this country. The War Cabinet, with full information, had watched the situation gradually unfold itself. But when the public realised the true position, they would sustain a severe shock. They would have to make a great effort to maintain their morale, and there was grave danger that, if we did what France wanted, we should find it impossible to rally the morale of the people.

The Minister without Portfolio said that, so far as the industrial centres of the country were concerned, they would regard anything like weakening on the part of the Government as a disaster.

In further discussion, general agreement was expressed with the views put forward by the Lord President, the Secretary of State for Air adding that he thought that it would be necessary to add some exhortation on the lines suggested by the Prime Minister. He rather hoped that the Prime Minister would find it possible to go over to Paris again shortly to see M. Reynaud and General Weygand.

Discussion then turned on the proposed appeal to the United States of America. The general view was that it was perhaps premature to make an appeal at the present time.

The Foreign Secretary said that the Foreign Office had prepared the draft for a broadcast that the Prime Minister might give to the Empire, and which would be relayed to the States. He indicated the general lines taken in this draft.
THE PRIME MINISTER said that he would be glad to look at the draft, but he thought he had better not broadcast at the present time.

The Meeting adjourned at 6.15 p.m., and the Lord President of the Council and the Foreign Secretary prepared a draft reply to M. Reynaud’s message.

The Meeting reassembled at 7 p.m., when Sir Alexander Cadogan was also present.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that in the interval he had seen the Ministers not in the War Cabinet. He had told them the latest news. They had not expressed alarm at the position in France, but had expressed the greatest satisfaction when he had told them that there was no chance of our giving up the struggle. He did not remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political life express themselves so emphatically.

The Prime Minister then read two letters which he had received from General Spears, recounting discussions which he had had with M. Reynaud.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL read the draft reply which he had prepared, and explained that it was intended to paint a picture which would persuade M. Reynaud that it was worth his while to go on fighting, and that we were not merely looking at the matter from our own point of view.

THE PRIME MINISTER expressed himself as extremely satisfied with the terms of the draft reply, and authorised the Foreign Secretary to despatch it to M. Reynaud, subject to such drafting amendments as might be found necessary.

(See Telegram No. 235 DIPP to Paris.)

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY again referred to the proposed appeal to the United States. It appeared that Mr. Bullitt had told M. Reynaud that he favoured the plan, but thought that Lord Lothian should be consulted before anything was done. This differed somewhat from what M. Reynaud had said.

The Foreign Secretary also referred to a telegram from General Smuts, which took up the points made in Mr. Menzies’ telegram. General Smuts suggested a message in the following terms:

"We are going to fight on even if we have to stand alone. We want nothing for ourselves. We are only concerned with the defence of world liberty against what will undoubtedly mean the domination of the world by Nazi power. Will the United States help or will they stand aside and take no action in defence of the rights of man?"

This was clearly a much better line of approach than that suggested by M. Reynaud. He thought that a telegram of
inquiry might be sent to Lord Lothian, giving him General
Smuts' suggestion and asking whether the publication of a
message on the lines proposed by General Smuts would help
to bring American public opinion on to our side. It would,
of course, be necessary to obtain the approval of the
United States Government before publishing such a message.

THE PRIME MINISTER thought that an appeal to the
United States at the present time would be altogether
premature. If we made a bold stand against Germany, that
would command their admiration and respect; but a
grovelling appeal, if made now, would have the worst
possible effect. He therefore did not favour making any
approach on the subject at the present time.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.
On arrival, after paying my respects to the Ambassador, I went straight to see Monsieur Paul Reynaud. I attended what was to all intents and purposes a War Council. There were present:

M. Paul Reynaud
Marshal Pétain
General Weygand
Admiral Darlan.

(Admiral Darlan took no part in the discussion. Marshal Pétain was perfectly calm but ineffective. The whole Council was really a discussion between Weygand and Reynaud.

2. There was also present for part of the time a Liaison Officer, Commandant Pauvel, who left General Blanchard at noon yesterday and got here this morning. (Incidentally I made up my old feud with General Weygand quite easily, and he has been very helpful and welcoming to me.) The attached document was actually dictated by Weygand to Paul Reynaud, who took it down in long-hand.

3. The first thing I did was to clear up the question of Gort's having been accused of falling back yesterday without warning and without orders. I got General Weygand to apologise for this, which he did with good grace; but I begged him not to jump in future to hasty conclusions concerning the British Commander who was loyal to a fault.

4. On the strength of the report brought in by Commandant Pauvel, General Weygand was inclined to alter his instructions to Blanchard in the sense of inviting him to fall back to the Channel harbours. But both Reynaud and I pointed out to him that he should bear in mind that Pauvel's report dated from mid-day Friday 24th...
24th, whereas he had in fact had further information from
Blanchard dated midnight (last night) 24th, and that it
might lead to dreadful confusion to disregard this latest
information just because Fauvel had appeared in person today.
In other words, Weygand tended to be somewhat influenced
by the fact that Fauvel was on the spot here today, forget­
ting that his information was 12 hours old. The result of
M. Reynaud's intervention, and to some extent of mine, was
to cause General Weygand to issue no further instructions
to General Blanchard and to stand by the instructions given
him yesterday, which were to use his own discretion. After
all, Blanchard on the spot knows the situation best and may
consider he has got a chance of getting through to the
south.

5. Weygand's opinion is that attacks to the south by
the Blanchard group, which includes ourselves, can serve
no other purpose than to gain breathing-space to fall back
to a line covering the harbours.

6. There seems no chance whatever of Weygand being
able to attack northwards from the Somme in sufficient
strength to disengage the Blanchard group. He has only 8
divisions spread over 130 kilometres and obviously this
is not an attacking force. He has a bridgehead at Picquigny
and two small bridgeheads south of Péronne – one of which
is Ham. He will do all he can to use these to distract
German attention, but cannot hope to be very effective.

7. As regards General Evans' command, Weygand would
be very glad if he could be instructed to accept "directive"
from the local French Army Commander. It does not seem a
sound ...
sound plan to have to ask London to give orders to General Evans. Communications are too difficult and precarious for this.

8. Weygand is very satisfied with Blanchard because he considers he showed initiative in declaring he was prepared to mount attacks to the south. (But it must be borne in mind always that in General Weygand's view any attacks to the south are "coups de boutoirs"—that is for the purpose of gaining breathing space.) Commandant Pauvel, on the other hand, told me personally that he thought Blanchard "très fatigué" by attempting to exercise the double command of his own army and the group of armies. I took him to de Margerie and made him repeat this so that de Margerie could put it to Weygand. I did not feel justified in suggesting myself that it might be wise to leave Blanchard in command of his army (which has confidence in him) and put somebody else in charge of the group of armies, as I only sense that Gort is not satisfied with Blanchard.

9. Commandant Pauvel was the very embodiment of catastrophe. His pessimistic point of view is to some extent at least explained by the fact that he has been ordered to go back to Blanchard. The Blanchard group have lost all their heavy guns, they have no armoured vehicles and movements have been incredibly hampered by the blow of refugees. Moreover every horse-drawn vehicle has been destroyed and the troops have no bread. There is some shortage of ammunition. He spoke of avoiding (without much conviction) a "capitulation en rase campagne" and told me he was convinced that panzer divisions would
some play to pass or for donation to public libraries.

Gen. Frank H. Corbin, Information, was present.

"I need to understand this situation in connection with the enemy. If your assistance to the enemy is such as "sends us to paradise," we are in the business of killing our own brethren."

was also present to explain the situation to the committee.

"I am not in the business of killing my own brethren."

The committee was composed of one man from each division, and any number of officers from the various commands of the army. The committee was in session without interruption from 9 A. M. to 1 P. M., the only pause being for a report from the Adjutant General.
get through any new line the French might attempt to defend if the Blanchard group was destroyed. I told him that whatever happened we were going on with the war. He lifted up his hands to heaven and said: "Then you will bomb us", and I said "Certainly; just as you have bombed Belgian and Dutch towns that have been unable to defend themselves". At the Council I made a similar remark to Paul Reynaud, though what he said was merely in the nature of a hint. Weygand supported me and said "Of course it goes without saying-I am fighting on."

10. In the Blanchard group there are only three good fighting divisions left out of eight. These are the 15th, the 25th and the 12th. You will see from the attached very rough sketch made during the actual Council Meeting from Fauvel's map that the position of the Blanchard group is that of a mushroom upside down, with most dangerous waist where local attacks simply must be made if Blanchard decides to move north instead of south.

11. Please excuse this very disjointed report, dictated in great haste to catch the 'plane. Reynaud thought I had best go back to-night, but Weygand thought at such a time of crisis I was better employed here, for the moment at least and with this view I agree myself.

Paris,
25th May, 1940.
Message de M. Paul Reynaud à M. Winston Churchill.

1. Le Commandant en Chef des trois armées belge, anglaise, et française est le Général Blanchard.

2. Le Général Prioux a remplacé le Général Blanchard dans le commandement de la 1ère armée française.

3. Le recul de quelques unités anglaises de la région d'Arras vers le canal de la Deule a provoqué, de la part de Général Weygand, hier, vendredi, à 16 h.; l'ordre suivant adressé au Général Blanchard:

   "Si vous estimez que le recul britannique de la région d'Arras rend votre mouvement offensif vers le sud impossible, il est nécessaire qu'au minimum vous assuriez le repli de votre groupe d'armée vers la mer, en conservant Dunkerque, indispensable à leur ravitaillement."

4. Ce matin, à la première heure, le Général Blanchard a télégraphié au Général Weygand, sans faire allusion à son télégramme d'hier à 16 heures, qu'en liaison avec certaines unités de l'armée britannique, il attaquerait pour s'emparer aujourd'hui d'une base de départ marquée par la ligne Marquion-Bois de Bourlon-Cambrai, avec l'intention de prolonger, dans la journée de demain, dimanche, cette attaque en direction général de Bapaume.

5. A la réception de ce télégramme du Général Blanchard, le Général Weygand lui a répondu par le télégramme suivant:

   "J'approuve vos dispositions et suis heureux que, malgré la situation relatée dans mon télégramme d'hier, vous ayez jugé être en état d'attaquer."

7. Le Général Weygand renvoie au Général Blanchard cet officier supérieur, et lui télégraphie que, dans la situation difficile où il est, dont nous n'ignorons rien, le Général Blanchard est seul juge des décisions à prendre et qu'il est gardien de l'honneur des drapeaux.

12.30 Heures - Le 25 Mai 1940.
OUTWARD TELEGRAM

SPECIAL DISTRIBUTION AND WAR CABINET.

To FRANCE.

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

Foreign Office, 28th May, 1940, 11.40 p.m. By Telephone.

No. 235 DIPP.

MOST IMMEDIATE.

Following from Prime Minister for M. Reynaud.

I have with my colleagues examined with the most careful and sympathetic attention the proposal for an approach by way of precise offer of concessions to Signor Mussolini that you have forwarded to me today, fully realising the terrible situation with which we are both faced at this moment.

2. Since we last discussed this matter the new fact which has occurred, namely the capitulation of the Belgian Army, has greatly changed our position for the worse, for it is evident that the chance of withdrawing the armies of Generals Blanchard and Gort from the Channel ports has become very problematical. The first effect of such a disaster must be to make it impossible at such a moment for Germany to put forward any terms likely to be acceptable and neither we nor you would be prepared to give up our independence without fighting for it to the end.

3. In the formula prepared last Sunday by Lord Halifax it was suggested that if Signor Mussolini would co-operate with us in securing a settlement of all European questions which would safeguard our independence and form the basis of a just and durable peace for Europe, we would be prepared to discuss his claims in the Mediterranean. You now propose to add certain specific offers, which I cannot suppose would have any chance of moving Signor Mussolini, and which once made could not be subsequently withdrawn, in order to induce him to undertake the role of mediator, which the formula discussed on Sunday contemplated.

4. I and my colleagues believe that Signor Mussolini has long had it in mind that he might eventually fill this role, no doubt counting upon substantial advantages for Italy in the process. But we are convinced that at this moment when Hitler is flushed with victory and certainly counts on early and complete collapse of Allied resistance, it would be impossible for Signor Mussolini to put forward proposals for a conference with any success. I may remind you also that the President of the U.S.A. has received a wholly negative reply to the proposal which we jointly asked him to make
and that no response has been made to the approach of Lord Halifax made to the Italian Ambassador here last Saturday.

5. Therefore, without excluding the possibility of an approach to Signor Mussolini at some time, we cannot feel that this would be the right moment and I am bound to add that in my opinion the effect on the morale of our people, which is now firm and resolute, would be extremely dangerous. You yourself can best judge what would be the effect in France.

6. You will ask, then, how is the situation to be improved. My reply is that by showing that after the loss of our two armies and the support of our Belgian Ally we still have stout hearts and confidence in ourselves, we shall at once strengthen our hands in negotiations and draw to ourselves the admiration and perhaps the material help of the U. . . . Moreover, we feel that as long as we stand together our undefeated Navy and our Air Force which is daily destroying German fighters and bombers at a formidable rate afford us the means of exercising in our common interest a continuous pressure upon Germany's internal life.

7. We have reason to believe that the Germans too are working to a time-table and that their losses and the hardships imposed on them together with the fear of our air raids is undermining their courage. It would indeed be a tragedy if by too hasty an acceptance of defeat we throw away a chance that was almost within our grasp of securing an honourable issue from the struggle.

8. In my view if we both stand out we may yet save ourselves from the fate of Denmark or Poland. Our success must depend first on our unity, then on our courage and endurance.
COPY OF ORIGINAL DECISION OF A TELEGRAM FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM HIGH COMMISSIONER IN THE UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA, DATED 27TH MAY

IMMEDIATE

No. 249. Most Secret

Your telegrams No. 29 and Circular 276.

In view of the latter Smuts has suspended action which he was proposing to take on the former. He has asked me to send you the following as indication of how his mind is working.

Smuts thinks it clear in view of telegram 276 that French collapse is imminent and that the Italians will either war against us forthwith or exert maximum pressure to shorten war. Egypt likely to be useless. Balkans to collapse, Turkey's position uncertain.

This means, in substance, that members of the British Commonwealth will be left alone to continue the struggle.

Smuts reaction to telegram 29 has been that it appeared hopeless at the moment to expect from appeal by the Dominion Prime Ministers to Roosevelt, better results than those already achieved through other channels.

It was the United States Congress and public opinion which had to be converted. His Majesty's great broadcast and developments in France were likely to have great influence in this direction.

Most therefore which Smuts had contemplated by way of reply to Menzies was to suggest to him that Mackenzie King might be asked by the other Dominion Prime Ministers to privately talk with (c). Put the Dominion viewpoint as strongly as possible and endeavour to ascertain the best line of further approach.

Any such action is of course out of date in the light of the latest developments (including Menzies to (c) through Casey) but Smuts time may come almost immediately for the confection of appeal to the United States on behalf of the United Kingdom and Dominions on the following lines. Begina.
We are going to fight on even if we have to stand alone. We want nothing for ourselves. We are only concerned with the defence of world liberty against what will undoubtedly mean the domination of the world by Nazi power. Will the United States help or will they stand aside and take no action in defence of the rights of man? Smuts contemplates that in the first instance such an appeal would have to go through diplomatic channels but also that if necessary it should be made public that such an appeal had been made. He thinks that the effect of this might well be to produce revulsion of feeling in the United States.

Smuts has asked me to add his deep sympathy with the United Kingdom in the present critical situation.