THE PRIME MINISTER said that as his colleagues were aware, for some time past he had been increasingly disturbed at the way in which our military operations in the Mediterranean were being hampered by the preparations for Operation OVERLORD, which would not take place for several months. The special ground of anxiety was landing ships and craft. We had given orders that no further British landing ships and craft should be sent back to this country from the Mediterranean and had recommended that they should be put unreservedly at General Eisenhower's disposal for the present. No instructions had, however, as yet been sent to General Eisenhower from the Combined Chiefs of Staff which would enable him to make use of them. The Prime Minister said that he thought that matters on this point had now reached a point at which intervention on the part of the War Cabinet was necessary.

THE CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF said that a telegram had been despatched by General Eisenhower on the previous day to the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the British Chiefs of Staff (NAF 499), in which he stated that the continued withdrawal of landing ships and craft according to schedule would make it impossible for him to carry out amphibious outflanking attacks. The result would be that we should have to depend on a series of frontal attacks; and if we had to rely on these methods we should not get to the desired line covering Rome and its airfields until some time during January, and should not secure it until some time during February. General Eisenhower asked authority to retain sufficient landing ships and craft to enable him to make amphibious outflanking assaults.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff read a telegram from the British Chiefs of Staff to the U.S. Chiefs of Staff through the Joint Staff Mission (C.S.O. (43) 924) urging that immediate decisions must be taken in this matter which could not await the SEXTANT Conference, and that General Eisenhower should be empowered to put into use forthwith such landing ships and craft as he required for the vigorous prosecution of his offensive in Italy. This was not a matter for bargaining about the precise numbers of American and British landing craft required.

THE PRIME MINISTER then read a telegram which he proposed to send to the President, asking in the name of the War Cabinet that the request in the Chiefs of Staff telegram should be given full consideration.

The War Cabinet -

Endorsed the line of action proposed by the Prime Minister in his draft telegram to the President.

Note: The Prime Minister's telegram to the President was subsequently despatched as telegram No. 490.
The War Cabinet resumed their discussion of President Roosevelt's proposal to send a communication to Mr. de Valera regarding the continued neutrality of Eire. The War Cabinet had before them the following further documents:

W.P.(43)456 - Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs.

W.P.(43)500 - Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, setting out his views as to the reply to be sent to the State Department.

W.P.(43)501 - An analysis of the differences between the first draft of the proposed United States communication to Mr. de Valera, as shown to the Prime Minister at Hyde Park (W.P.(43)387) and the later draft forwarded from the United States Ambassador (Annex B. in W.P.(43)408).

The Prime Minister said that he had now studied the later draft of the proposed communication to Mr. de Valera. It had clearly been whittled down by the State Department. He thought that this later draft would not achieve any useful purpose, and that a reply should be sent, broadly on the lines proposed by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, deprecating the despatch of the communication as not proposed by the United States Ambassador.

The War Cabinet agreed in principle that a reply should be sent to the State Department deprecating the despatch to Mr. de Valera of a communication on the lines proposed, and agreed that the terms of this despatch should be settled by the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister said that it remained to consider whether any attempt should be made to deal with the Irish situation. He did not agree with the view that we should leave matters as they now stood, so that Eire would have a blank hand when peace came. No doubt the Irish people had behaved very badly and it would be easy to be content with allowing the score of misdeeds to pile up against them. But he was not prepared to write the position off as hopeless without making some attempt to see whether we could not get a united Ireland within the British Commonwealth and Empire.

The Prime Minister added that he was not impressed with the argument that the offers which we had made in 1940 had been rejected. At that time we had faced the world alone, and it was perhaps not to be wondered at that the Irish had refused those offers. He would like to have liberty to take soundings and see whether it would not be
possible to make a start on the lines which he had in mind. He would, of course, report progress from time to time to the War Cabinet. There was no reason why anything need be said to President Roosevelt at this stage.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that he thought our position in Ireland was now considerably better than it had been. The Irish appreciated the attitude which we had adopted towards them during the war, and today they liked us better than they liked the Americans. He also thought that, owing to a kind of perverted logic, the Irish would be all the more determined not to enter the war on our side now that the stage had been reached when it was clear that we were going to win.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS said that he had certain strong convictions on the Irish situation. There were two problems to be faced—partition and neutrality. The difficulty which he saw was that any attempt to link these two problems would only set back a solution of the Irish difficulties. He was convinced that it was impossible to shift Mr. de Valera on the question of neutrality. The latter’s whole purpose had throughout been to separate Ireland as far as possible from Great Britain, and in his Constitution of 1937 he had broken almost the last links between Ireland and Great Britain from the Irish point of view. He had abolished the appeal to the Privy Council and the Oath of Allegiance, and the only remaining mention of the King’s name was in the Letters of Credence to diplomats going abroad—where it was, presumably, retained on the grounds that it was of practical value in these matters not to be entirely cut off from the British Empire.

In Mr. de Valera’s eyes, neutrality was now a symbol of Irish independence. It had become an act of faith and de Valera could not be moved on this point. The Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs read an extract from an observer in Ireland (Miss Elizabeth Bowen), dated 12th October, which recorded a hardening of the atmosphere in Ireland in favour of neutrality.

Continuing, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs said that if it was impossible to shift the Irish on neutrality during the war, it was clearly out of the question to make any kind of concession to them in regard to partition. After the war, however, he thought the position might be considerably easier to handle. The Irish people, strangely enough, would feel that they had been well treated by us in being allowed to stay out of the war; and they had now a greatly increased respect for the British people and for the justice of our attitude towards them.

He therefore favoured not making any approach until after the war and he feared that any approach now would revive the old bitterness and distrust. Moreover, many people in this country would be opposed to negotiations with the Irish while Hostilities continued.

He thought, however, that some Ministers held a different view: in if it were the question of some unofficial emissary making enquiries on his own initiative as to Mr. de Valera’s frame of mind on the question of neutrality, it might help to clarify the position.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL expressed general agreement with the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs’ views as to Ireland.

The Secretaries of State for the Home Department said that at the present stage he had not, of course, thought it right to make any contacts on this matter with the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. He did; not, however, imagine that the Government of Northern Ireland had in mind the possibility of any arrangement being come to at the present...
time. He thought that if the issue of neutrality was raised Mr. de Valera would inevitably switch on to the partition question. For his own part, while he would like to see a united Ireland, he thought that we could only agree to this on the condition that the defence of the United Ireland was made a responsibility of the United Kingdom. If this was not done, there would be a risk that, in another war, we might find ourselves faced with a United Ireland which was neutral. This would be intolerable from the defence point of view.

The Prime Minister said that it was, of course, clear that the loyal North had saved us from having to conquer the rest of Ireland with British arms. If we had needed the Irish ports as a matter of life and death, he had no doubt that we should have gone and taken them; and that we would have been right to have done so.

The Minister of Labour and National Service said that 5,000 Irish a month were now coming to this country, and he was very reluctant to see any action taken which might start up an agitation among the large numbers of Irish people now working over here. The main issue was, he thought, one of timing; and on the whole he would prefer that no action should be taken until (a) the education controversy had been settled and (b) we had captured Rome.

The Prime Minister said that he was not afraid of the results of a public appeal in this matter. One plan might be that he should make a speech in which he would appeal to the rank and file of the Irish people over the heads of their leaders. There were many elements who would be glad to come in on the winning side and, moreover, would be glad to be on our side in a quarrel in which we were in the right. He added that, in his approach to this question he was influenced less by reports of public opinion than by a great urge to find a remedy to the present state of affairs, notwithstanding the risks and difficulties involved. It was, of course, clear that we should never bring pressure to bear on Northern Ireland. As regards timing, he feared that, if we left matters until the end of the war, it would be very much harder to get a solution. He did not see what we should gain by not raising the issue until after the war.

The Minister of Labour and National Service said that he thought that after the war, when the large volume of employment for Irish labourers in this country came to an end, Mr. de Valera would have economic troubles which would make him more likely to want to come to an agreement with us.

The Minister of Aircraft Production said that he was in favour of doing all that could be done to find a solution of the Irish question. But it was important to settle what sort of approach was going to be made. He thought that while the Irish would not give up neutrality, which was now a sort of myth for them, they might be prepared to take some friendly steps towards us.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to see some action to lift the matter on to a higher plane. Nothing could be worse than a continuance of the present position.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he favoured soundings being taken.

The Minister of State said he would like to see partition ended, and as soon as possible. We were,
however, faced with a considerable dilemma. He thought it was true that if we allowed the Southern Irish to remain neutral until the end of the war they would realise that they were in our debt on this account, that they were dependent on us, and would be more ready on that account to accept a reasonable settlement; on the other hand it would then be more difficult to get Northern Ireland to agree to any change in their position if Southern Ireland had remained neutral throughout the war.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought that our best opportunity might come after the war when those Irishmen who had fought with us in this war returned to Ireland. A Government which contained many of those who had fought for us in the war would be more likely to help us.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR said that he shared the Prime Minister's urge to try and deal with the Irish situation, notwithstanding the difficulties involved. On the question whether anything effective could be done at the present time, he thought that nothing could be done by negotiating with de Valera. But there were others behind him and he would like to know what were the views of Mr. Dillon and of the leaders of the Church. He thought that the matter should be explored and soundings made.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL said that nearly everything which had been said that evening reminded him of what had been said in comparable discussions in 1917. The only new point raised had been what Mr. Bevin had said as to the fear of industrial unrest, but he thought that if negotiations were started the Minister of Labour would be able to handle this side of the matter.

The Lord Privy Seal said that he favoured an attempt being made now to deal with the Irish question. It was in our favour that we were now much stronger than in 1940; while Mr. de Valera's position had weakened; and the farmers' party was now strongly hostile to him. It would be a tragedy if Ireland was to continue to the end of the war to pursue a separate policy to that of Great Britain.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he hoped that the War Cabinet would agree that he might make careful soundings. He would, of course, exercise great caution in any steps he took. In particular, he would have to watch the reactions of the Conservative Party; but he thought that the Northern Ireland people knew that he would never bring coercion to bear upon them. He would also bear in mind the differences of view which had been expressed in the Cabinet on the matter.

This course was agreed to.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS asked that he might be consulted by the Prime Minister as to the nature of the soundings which he proposed to take.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he regretted that he could not agree to this course. It had been laid down at the Imperial Conference of 1918 that the Prime Minister had the absolute right to correspond direct with the Prime Ministers of the Dominions.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS said that, as the Minister responsible for the Department which dealt with relations with Eire, he would be held responsible by
Parliament for the policy pursued in regard to Eire. If therefore, action was to be taken of which he was to be kept in ignorance, he would have to consider his position.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that everyone was free to do that.