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Transcript of Interview with Prime Minister of
Northern Ireland. Telefis Eireann,
18 February, 1965.

Interviewer, (Mr. John O'Donoghue): We begin our programme with a special thirty minute interview with the Northern Premier, Captain Terence O'Neill. As we said in our documentary on the North some time ago, we think that mutual knowledge by North and South is essential and so we asked Captain O'Neill for this interview, which ranges over his personal feelings on a good many subjects as well as his views on North-South relations. I think you will find it a frank and forthright interview which, incidentally, he agreed to give with the minimum of fuss and formality.

Captain O'Neill is 46 and entered politics as a Member of Parliament for mid-Antrim in 1946 having served in the Irish Guards during the Second World War. A short time after entering Stormont he became in succession Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Minister of Home Affairs, Minister of Finance and succeeded Lord Brookeborough as Prime Minister two years ago.

My conversation with Captain O'Neill took place in the Prime Minister's private sitting room at Stormont Castle.

O'Donoghue: Prime Minister, when Ireland is playing England, in a Rugby International for instance, what do you feel, as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, as somebody from Northern Ireland?

Captain O'Neill: I think we all feel the same and we all cheer for Ireland and we always have done.

O'Donoghue: You don't find any awkwardness in questions of allegiances when Rugby is being played?

Captain O'Neill: No, certainly not.

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O'Donoghue: You have a very historic name in Irish history, Prime Minister. Do you feel any sort of affinity, do you know a great deal about, are you very interested in the family of O'Neill, away back to the famous names of the O'Neill clan?

Captain O'Neill: Certainly. Naturally this is a matter of very great interest to me. My family really has rather a curious dichotomy because I am at once descended from the founder of Belfast, Sir Arthur Chichester, in the male line, and through the female line I am descended from the O'Neills. But there were two families of O'Neills, the O'Neills of Tyrone and the O'Neills of Clandeboy, and my family is descended from the O'Neills of Clandeboy. At this very point of time The O'Neill, who lives in Portugal, in Lisbon, is also a Clandeboy O'Neill and not a Tyrone O'Neill. This is a point of some historical interest.

O'Donoghue: Have you met him?

Captain O'Neill: Yes I have.

O'Donoghue: This planned series of programmes on Irish history by BBC, do you think this is a good idea, Prime Minister, in the North, and would you like to see it extended in education generally?

Captain O'Neill: I think it is a very good thing that people should understand the history of the area in which they live. It may help them to understand the problems with which they are trying to deal to-day, in the 1960's. Yes, I think it is a very good idea.

O'Donoghue: On coming to you personally, Mr. O'Neill. In the last two months, particularly since the meetings across the Border, it has been noticed that you have either shown or acquired a determination which lots of people said you did not have before. You have said very strongly that you intend to be Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and to carry out whatever policies you think are right, whether people agree with them or not. Have you always wanted to do this and have you felt the time was not ripe?

/Captain O'Neill

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Captain O'Neill: I think it is inevitable that something one says at a particular time is then possibly recollected for all time. I made this remark because I was asked whether I was worried, on the evening on which Mr. Lemass came and visited me in this room, I was asked on television in Belfast whether I was worried that there would be some people in the Unionist Party who would not approve of what I had done and I replied to that that a Prime Minister must make up his own mind what he thinks is right for the country and do it, even though this may be annoying to a certain section of his Party. I have always felt that. I think you must also realise that any leader of a Party that has been in power for 40 years inherits the problems and the allegiances of his predecessor. When I came to power in Northern Ireland there were certain things that were not smiled upon. One was planning, to take an entirely non-political item of interest; another was having any kind of dealings with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions; and the third one was, of course, that it was traditional that the Prime Minister in the North of Ireland should never meet or speak to (unless he said something unpleasant about) the Prime Minister of Southern Ireland. I have still not completed two years in this Office and we now talk in very friendly terms about planning, we have recognised the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, or rather the Northern Ireland Committee of it, and now Mr. Lemass and myself have met. This constitutional disbarment for the meeting was quite a hurdle to surmount. This was why I was so grateful to Mr. Lemass for his willingness to accept my invitation to this actual room in which we are having our conversation. I felt all along that if he had agreed to meet me in some hotel room on the Border, or something of that kind, that this would have been entirely inadequate to the situation. Now that I have been down to Iveagh House as well, I feel that we have both surmounted an historical obstacle, which had grown up over the years and which made it impossible for the Leaders of

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the two parts of Ireland to meet. I think we have both since our meeting established the fact that neither of us has surrendered any of our own principles and yet we have been able to meet in friendship mutually to discuss the problems which confront us in this island in which we live. I think that this is a good thing. At the same time, I think it must be realised that the bitternesses and difficulties which existed in the past have naturally taken time to die down but nevertheless it was necessary for the two Leaders to take this bold action in order to clear away this problem which existed of the two Leaders being quite unable to meet. I don't necessarily think that there is going to be a tremendous upsurge in trade or anything of that kind between the two portions of this island because, as Mr. Lemass himself has been the first to admit, the tariff barrier is erected by the South against the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, even if there cannot be a great increase in trade, there could be areas such as tourism, such as physical planning, such as transport, such as agriculture, in which discussions can take place. I think the very fact of our meeting has altered the atmosphere. I mentioned in Belfast the other night that the Chief Veterinary Officer of our Ministry of Agriculture had previously had contacts with his opposite number in the South but they were rather under the counter. Now he can openly go to Dublin and discuss these problems. At the moment the problem is fowl pest; it may later on be something else. This has been made possible by our meeting and this is the kind of good result which I hope will result from our meeting.

O'Donoghue: Have you found out, Prime Minister, that you are less likely to misunderstand each other on both sides now, that you would seek clarification before initiating a policy which might call for reaction and might affect the interests of the other side? Would you in fact consult each other before initiating a new policy in one of these fields?

/Captain O'Neill

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Captain O'Neill: Well I think now that we have met we have got over this obstacle which we both inherited from the past. As one of the Members of Parliament put it at Stormont when we were debating this meeting the other day, we could now agree to differ, and even this is an advance. I hope that if Mr. Lemass states that he has not surrendered any of his long-term principles and views and hopes, and I state that I have not surrendered any of mine, and that I remain just as determined as I was before to remain in the United Kingdom, I hope this will not be a bar to sensible civilised discussions taking place in the future.

O'Donoghue: Prime Minister, if you have to initiate a policy up here which might draw reactions in the South, or vice versa, will the two Governments notify each other in advance of the policies they propose to pursue - in some issue which might affect the other?

Captain O'Neill: If you are referring to anything which might emanate from these discussions, obviously we would have to have talked about them a long time before we got round to them. You see, unofficially there has been contact in the past and we have tried, in so far as we could, on things which affected both of us, we have tried to keep in some sort of touch. This was easier in the early days of the Government of Northern Ireland because a lot of the officials at Stormont had transferred from Dublin Castle. With the passage of time these officials died and the contacts died out and I would think that probably, for the last 8, 9, 10 years, there has not been all that much contact. But now that contacts have been re-established I would have thought the danger of what you suggest would be found less likely to take place than it has been recently.

O'Donoghue: You said recently that you did not envisage any tripartite meeting between the Government in London - Westminster - and the Government here and the Government in Dublin. Why is this, because up to now you have in fact seemed to be stressing

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the fact that the meetings between Mr. Lemass and yourself have been organised in a purely Irish context without reference, except the most meagre one, to the United Kingdom Government?

Captain O'Neill: This was again in answer to a particular question. It was stated up here in the North and also by one rather, possibly slightly, extreme gentleman in the South that these discussions had been ordered by London and that in the case of the South this was the price for the Anglo-Eire Trade Agreement that might be signed and so on. Well I have always, and I think Mr. Lemass may have too, denied that any suggestion for our meeting emanated from any source outside of our own sources and this is why I had to make this remark because of the Press speculation on this subject. There is no intention to have any tripartite discussions in the foreseeable future and I think I am fully entitled to make this plain because if you allow a story of a speculative nature to remain in the Press, it tends to grow and this is why I made this statement, in order to clear the air.

O'Donoghue: Up to now Mr. O'Neill, we would have supposed in the South that you would have taken every opportunity, not you only personally, but any representative of the official opinion in the North, would have taken an occasion to stress that you could not do very much without reference to Westminster. Is not this a new development that you are stressing decisions being made in an Irish context?

Captain O'Neill: It is perfectly true of course that, as part of the United Kingdom and as a provincial Government with limited powers, it is perfectly true that we cannot take any very great steps without having those steps agreed in London, but, of course, most of the steps I have in mind are steps which

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involve finance and this meeting did not involve any finance except the petrol used by Mr. Lemass driving up from Dublin and the petrol used by me driving down to Dublin. The reason I think why this has been reiterated so often, that we cannot take any step on our own, is because we are part of the British economy. We get a very large injection of finance from London and, in consequence, we are very much bound up with the British financial system. In fact - if I might take this opportunity, if you would allow me to expand a bit because I think it would be well for the South to appreciate this - we could not possibly afford to run the British Welfare State in the North of Ireland were it not for an injection of something between £15 m. and £20 m. a year from London to help us to run this British Welfare State from which all people in the North of Ireland benefit enormously. In fact, I had a letter this morning from someone in the South - we have both, Mr. Lemass and I, been showered with correspondence since our meeting, nearly all of it favourable - I had a letter from somebody in the South this morning stressing the hope that I had explained the benefits of the British Welfare State to Mr. Lemass. So there is somebody at least who understands it down there. But this is something very valuable to us and this is something we would not lightly give up under any circumstances. Then there are the British agricultural subsidies which are currently running at about £25 m. a year. Once again, we could not possibly bear those subsidies on our Stormont Vote. We would bankrupt ourselves in a remarkably short time if we did it. I think very often these financial advantages which we get from

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being part of the United Kingdom are overlooked in the South, and I often feel that if the South realised the tremendous financial advantages all our farmers get from the agricultural subsidies, all our people get from the British Welfare State, the free health, free education, then they would appreciate that there were sound and solid reasons why we wished to defend our constitutional position.

O'Donoghue: Prime Minister, I know you won't be offended when I say that I think the reaction sometimes in the South to this, where they do know it, is that you are in a sense accepting help, if not exactly charity, and this is something which they do not see as an advantage.

Captain O'Neill: Well, could I put it in another way. You have raised something which I am very conscious of. Could I put it to you in another way and that is this, that we get these benefits as of right because we are part of the United Kingdom. If you were to separate the South West of England, Exeter as the capital, Devon and Cornwall as the territory, and set it up as the South West area of England it would be a very non-viable State. It would be deeply in the red, it could not afford the British Welfare State. It could not afford its British agricultural subsidies. We are in the same position as that but, because we are part of the United Kingdom, we get these benefits as of right and I think this is possibly a fairer way to put it. Nevertheless, I do think that there are people in the South who do not realise the benefits we get, especially those who live further away from the Border. I think the Border people do realise it because they see it going on just over the garden fence but the people living down in Cork may not realise the great advantages we get and I would like and I am very grateful to you for the opportunity of expressing this point of view on this medium.

/O'Donoghue:

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O'Donoghue: Mr. O'Neill, if you see, as you seem to have done recently, a great many problems to be solved, financial and otherwise, within an Irish context particularly, can you, without exactly going back to the original Act, can you envisage something eventually like an Irish Council, like the Irish Council that was originally proposed? What form it will take is another matter.

Captain O'Neill: Now, I don't think we can really start running before we have started walking. It is perfectly true this Irish Council was envisaged and it is perfectly true that it failed to get off the ground in modern parlance. But I doubt very much whether the climate of opinion is right for something of that kind of thing at the present time and I think it would be better that we should concentrate on inter-Government discussions for the moment.

O'Donoghue: What do you see as the essence of Unionism?

Captain O'Neill: Well, of course, historically, the whole purpose and point of the Unionist party was to keep Ireland within the United Kingdom. Carson himself was not a Northerner, he was a Southerner. He represented Dublin University, he represented Trinity College in London. This is all historical and those days have passed and the Unionist Party since then has been concentrated in the North. I often explain to people up here that whereas in 1912 it was very largely a question of loyalty to the Crown and things of that kind which made us stay in the United Kingdom - because the standard of living in those days all over Ireland was approximately the same, or shall we say in Dublin and Belfast approximately the same, obviously it was very much lower in the West - but now we have added on to that original basis the things that we have just been discussing here this afternoon and, therefore, in a sense the platform of the Unionist Party is very much more solidly based now than it was in 1912. This again may come as a surprise to the South.

/O'Donoghue:

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O'Donoghue: Prime Minister, you have done a lot of planning up here. You had a number of Commissions report on major problems like the Lockwood Committee, the Matthew and one or two others. This in fact has suggested to a lot of people that the degree to which you are going to plan your society means that you are more socialist than the Socialists. Now how do you fit in as a colleague of the Conservatives in Britain?

Captain O'Neill: I think this is a slight exaggeration and I think the Conservative Party, certainly the younger members of the Conservative Party, were converted to planning about three or four years ago. I regard this new trend in Northern Ireland as a manifestation of the new Conservatism rather than as following in the wake of Socialist policies. So I think that this is quite justified and indeed all our planning in the North has the support of the younger members of our Party who realise that things are going to happen in a haphazard manner in any case - such for instance as that Portadown and Lurgan are bound to grow together and form one union in a haphazard manner in any case - and it would therefore be far better that that coming together should be planned and arranged. This I think is accepted, certainly by the more forward looking members of our Party and is, I would suggest, a manifestation of modern Conservative thought.

O'Donoghue: On that very question Mr. O'Neill, do you think that the less forward looking people who up to now have come within the general umbrella of Unionism are likely for a number of reasons, because of disapproval of what you have done in various ways, politically and otherwise, to oppose you by putting up candidates against official Unionist candidates in another election, or otherwise in fact to break away and form a new party?

/Captain O'Neill:

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Captain O'Neill: Well, time will only show whether this will be the case or not and I don't really know whether Mr. Lemass or whether I will have a greater backlash to use modern terms of parlance. But I think undoubtedly that the actual fact that we have met has upset certain people in the North and it may well be that there will be manifestations of the fact that they have been upset, in some way or other.

O'Donoghue: Briefly, Prime Minister, on some other aspects of Conservatism, as we have seen it in Britain, you went to Eton which is I suppose the most famous public school. What do you feel about the question of education generally, - whether there should be public schools, private schools or indeed voluntary schools, which is an issue in any country which has a very strongly committed religious population?

Captain O'Neill: I think there is room for every kind of school in the community and certainly we have every kind of school in Northern Ireland. Obviously there is a need for this if we have it and I think that this is a good idea. I would also like to explain to my Southern viewers through you that I had the very greatest difficulty when I was in Washington about sixteen months ago in making Mr. Bobby Kennedy believe that we gave 65% grants to Catholic schools. As you know under the American Constitution this is forbidden and he said of course any such proposals in America would be quite out of the question. But I don't want to dwell on that. Incidentally, as you may know, I am the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland to visit a voluntary school, in the Ballymoney area recently, and I was extremely well received, and it was a very happy occasion. I think myself that there is room for every type of school but, at the same time, if a religious organisation wishes to have a totally separate form of education, then I do not think they can expect the State to pay for that 100%,
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although doubtless this is what they would like to happen. I think this is an unreasonable suggestion. But so far as different types of school are concerned, I think this is something we have got already, I think it is something that is bound to continue and obviously there is a need for it.

O'Donoghue: While we are on that point, not confining it to Ireland at all, are you interested in ecumenism and relationship between the different Churches?

Captain O'Neill: I think there is no doubt whatsoever that Pope John did undoubtedly set in a completely new trend and made the present more friendly relationships, which exist for instance in England, made these relations possible. Previous to that, it was very difficult for an extremely devout Catholic Lord Mayor of Wolverhampton, or somewhere, to attend some civic function without offending against the tenets of his Church. But I do honestly think that Pope John has made a breakthrough in inter-religious relationship by the very forward looking attitude he adopted in his very unfortunately short pontificate.

O'Donoghue: Do you feel now, Mr. O'Neill, that perhaps with a new Cardinal in Armagh that this might have a reflection inside the North, and what do you feel generally about relationships between the Catholic Church here and you, officially, the Government?

Captain O'Neill: Well, this has of course improved over the years. In the past the Church has not attended any Government functions. I think that this will probably change. In fact, a Catholic priest did, I think, for the first time in Northern Ireland's history, attend a Garden Party at Government House last Summer. I think this will change and I think it will be a change for the good. Very often the Government functions we have here have no political significance whatsoever. They are

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held for some visiting dignitary who may have nothing to do with anything connected with Ireland and yet, in the past, they have felt themselves bound to refuse an invitation to a reception of this kind. I think and hope and believe this will change. I think that probably the present Archbishop, I am not quite sure whether he is technically a Cardinal yet or not, is a man of forward looking views. I think that he probably would wish to make this change himself.

O'Donoghue: When we were talking about planning and I linked it with religion, Prime Minister, you explained that you are going to spend so much on the physical environment of people in Northern Ireland. Are you as a Government going to be interested also in breaking down the barriers and in fact getting rid of whatever discrimination there is?

Captain O'Neill: Well, this is a difficult subject to talk about and the more you talk about it the more difficult it becomes. In many cases the alleged discrimination is in fact not taking place; in other cases it may be; and in many cases it's taking place from both sides. One would hope that the improved relationship will tend to make discrimination less and less fashionable if it is in fact taking place, because by having improved relations between the two Communities in the North of Ireland, then the feelings are better between those two Communities and the likelihood, the ability to discriminate must therefore be lessened.

O'Donoghue: Now on a question of wider spheres outside Ireland generally still, Prime Minister, what about the European Economic Community? Are you interested in fitting into a larger context than merely one which includes Britain and Ireland?

/Captain O'Neill:

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Captain O'Neill: Well, this of course does take us back to square one. You earlier said, was it not so, that we were bound rather to do whatever was done in London and in the case of joining or not joining EEC this is very much, naturally, a thing for the UK as a whole. Either we go in or we don't go in. During the period when there was some doubt as to whether we were going to get in or not, there was a complete drying up of the introduction of American industry into Northern Ireland because of the uncertainty in the matter. An American industrialist coming to a country which is going to be in EEC is going to have a population of 300 million maybe whereas, if he has only a population of 53 million in the U.K., this is a tremendous difference. I think those sort of things have got to be borne in mind, but so far as Northern Ireland is concerned the question of whether or not we join Europe must be a matter for London.

O'Donoghue: Mr. O'Neill, how much do you know about the South and on that general subject to you think there ought to be, and in what ways ought there to be, a greater exchange of information and a greater familiarisation between both parts?

Captain O'Neill: I am all in favour of a greater knowledge of the North in the South and a greater knowledge of the South in the North. In fact, ignorance in its various manifestations I think is a very dangerous thing. I think it is because we have a picture, or some of us in the North have a picture of the South which is probably out of date, and because the South has a picture of the North that is almost certainly out of date, I think a lot of strong feelings exist which might evaporate if there were a better knowledge. I think that this is indisputable and I would hope that it will be one of the results of these meetings. I think this has already taken place. I see reports of Stormont proceedings in the Dublin Press, in some cases rather fuller and more verbatim reports than we see in our Northern

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Press. This is a new development. This is a good development. And I think the more we know about each other the better.

O'Donoghue: Now that we happen to be on television do you think that this is a way of doing this?

Captain O'Neill: I think it probably is. We have got for instance some excellent travel films in the North which have got no political significance whatsoever. I think it would be an excellent thing if Telefís could show them and equally the same could be done in the North. I think all media should be used, so that there should be a better understanding between the two portions of this Island.

O'Donoghue: How do you as a person, Mr. O'Neill, feel about the suggestions that have been made so many times about you, that you are somehow above ordinary politics in Northern Ireland, that you have been far too genteel and out of touch and indeed about the suggestions that were made when you became Prime Minister, that you somehow slipped in the backdoor on the basis of privilege, even class privilege?

Captain O'Neill: Well, of course, it is hard for me to answer such a personal and direct question as that. I was just wondering, as you were framing your question, how this picture of gentility fitted in with the picture you were painting earlier in this programme of my wish to take whatever action I thought was necessary even if it offended certain elements in my own Party. I think because one expresses oneself in a certain way it does not mean to say that one is not able to take any necessary action which is called for, and possibly this is where the idea may have got about that I am not a tough Party Manager or something of that kind. But I think I can assure you that if it is necessary to take action, such as asking Mr. Lemass to visit Belfast without consulting anybody, I am perfectly prepared to take it.