

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2000/6/659

Title: Transcript of 'Twenty Four Hours' interview with Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister, conducted by Robert McKenzie

Creation Date(s): 19 August, 1969

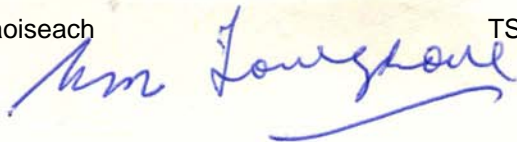
Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 4 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. L. Loughran", is written across the top of the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

In sending you these transcripts, we want to make it clear that the programme was entirely impromptu and that this is not, therefore, a text; it is a transcription made from dictaphone recordings. There are often inaccuracies of detail due to the clash of voice or a not perfectly audible word.

These transcripts, therefore, represent the general trend of the verbal discussion but should not be regarded as accurate in detail. . Moreover, they do not indicate the changed flavour which expression and gesture in television can add to the spoken .. word.

Transcribed from a t.v. telediphone recording.

EXTRACT

"TWENTY FOUR HOURS"

THE PRIME MINISTER

interviewed by Robert McKenzie

Recorded from transmission.

2220

August 19th, 1969

MCKENZIE: Prime Minister, is there a real likelihood now that Ulster can avoid civil war as a result of your agreement here tonight?

WILSON: Things have been very grave for the last couple of weeks. I believe we have made progress tonight but it is still a very dangerous situation. I think that's one reason why we've taken five hours and indeed the talks are not over yet, though we've reached agreement I think on the main principles, and on a declaration which will govern the relations between the two governments in our handling of these problems, in the months to come.

MCKENZIE: What's the big change as a result of the new agreement?

WILSON: Oh the big change is that the General Officer commanding Northern Ireland, General Freeland, will now take charge of all the security forces in Northern Ireland, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Special Constabulary, as long as they are still in operation and he will be in complete charge now of the whole situation.

MCKENZIE: But doesn't this raise the danger that Britain — the Government in Westminster will have the responsibility for law and order but political policy will still be made at Stormont?

WILSON: We still have that responsibility and indeed it was the intervention of British troops last week that averted the very danger that you were referring to a moment or two ago. On the political responsibility, this is of course that of the Stormont Government, and the Stormont Parliament, but we have made our views known over a period of two or three years about the reforms that are necessary — long overdue indeed — and there has been a ready response in the past few months in connection with housing, local government reform, civil rights and other matters, and indeed the things we were talking about here at Downing Street in May, most of them are now on the Statute Book. And tonight we've agreed on the need to maintain that momentum, — in no way certainly the Northern Ireland Government will make it their business to see that our views on reform are very fully dealt with in their future actions.

MCKENZIE: Have they promised in fact to speed up these reforms in any way?

WILSON: Well they have already speeded them up. As I say: so many ^{are} on the Statute Book but they are, I think ^{now} moving ahead very fast.

MCKENZIE: Now there is the problem that the Catholic minority, a very large minority, clearly had begun to lose confidence in Stormont as a fair government, as far as they ^{were} concerned — how are you going to be sure that you can recapture the confidence in Catholics?

JM.

TWENTY FOUR HOURS 19.8.69

-2-

WILSON: Well I think that is a very real problem, I agree. The first thing, I think, in the situation that developed last week was the intervention of British troops who were accepted as utterly neutral, without fear or favour to either side, politically or in religious terms, or in any other way, and this will be maintained. And now that the British forces are taking over the whole of the security control any doubts, any feelings, about any aspect of security will now be resolved because Britain has this responsibility. But, so far as other questions are concerned, we shall have government representatives in Belfast now, representing our viewpoint to the Northern Ireland government.

MCKENZIE: Will there be a political representative or a civil service representative... ?

WILSON: No...At the moment it will be Civil Service responsibilities, acting under the direction of the British Government. But before long the Home Secretary will go over and we shall then have to consider what further steps we need to take in the matter of representation, including, of course, political representation.

MCKENZIE: Did you look at the question of perhaps going over to direct rule from Westminster, at least in the sense that Wales or Scotland are in one way governed from Westminster?

WILSON: No, we did not consider that at this time. This has been a very difficult situation, once we had to take over the responsibility for security, but as long as there is a willingness on the part of the government of Northern Ireland to move forward on political reform, including civil rights. You see, in our declaration ^{tonight} which I believe will be accepted as the official declaration of both governments, governing the whole future of Northern Ireland for a very long time to come - we have laid down, both governments have agreed, that every citizen of Northern Ireland, no matter what his political beliefs, no matter what his ~~religious views~~ religious beliefs - will be treated with the same freedom, the same equality before the law, the same freedom from discrimination, in all matters, as any other citizen of the United Kingdom, whether in Wales or in Scotland, or in England. ^{and} I think this is a very important thing for people to realise.

MCKENZIE: But the rate of reform being carried on by the Stormont Government clearly wasn't sufficient to convince a great many Catholic activists they were going to get a fair deal and is there any reason to think they'll believe it now.

WILSON: Well it has speeded up a great deal as I say, in the past few months. I think we're paying the price here not for failing to deal with the progress of reform in the last few months or even the last year or two, but with 50 years in which far too little was done.

MCKENZIE: Well now looking ahead surely Northern Ireland is going to be in really serious trouble now. Its investment programme will be in danger, because of these riots and so on. Its tourist industry will be in ruins. What kind of action will you take here at Westminster to help them get back on their feet?

WILSON: Well we've given tremendous help, of course, in getting factories there and it's a great tragedy to me to think of factories which I saw myself twenty years ago, when I went to Northern Ireland, being burned down in these riots.

MCKENZIE: People will be pretty reluctant to invest there now...

JM.

TWENTY FOUR HOURS 19.8.69...

-3-

WILSON: I'm afraid this is a very serious problem and the Northern Ireland Government have been made only too well aware of it. We have given great help recently to shipyards - we've just provided the biggest dock in the world for building these mammoth tankers and, of course, we have, I think, greatly improved the position of the aircraft industry there. ^{No,} this is a very serious problem but the first thing is to get stability. I believe that stability comes first of all by the use of the British troops, which we're very reluctant to send but it ^{was} right to send them. Secondly, by what we've done tonight, by the full assumption of security control by the British General in charge, and also by making absolutely clear now ^{there's going to} be no discrimination at all between any citizen of Northern Ireland, whatever his views or beliefs.

MCKENZIE: But supposing one were a Catholic and learning tonight that the R.U.C. - the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and the B-Specials, are now in effect going to be part of the British security forces in the place, wouldn't there be a deep anxiety, a feeling that in some way you were bolstering up the Government in Stormont yet allowing it to carry on at roughly its own pace?

WILSON: I think the position of the British forces there is understood. We are utterly neutral - between all political factions, all religious communities and it is our intention, and indeed after our declaration tonight - that of Northern Ireland - and I've never been in doubt about this particular question, that they are now going to be treated with absolute equality so far as this is concerned. But the question of the B-specials that were mentioned, which has caused very great concern and has been very adversely commented on in the British press...

MCKENZIE: What about the charge in the TELEGRAPH, for example, that you - the British Government in London - insisted upon the calling out of the B-specials to start with?

WILSON: There was no truth in that statement at all. I believe it was printed by the journalist in question in absolute good faith but I think he was sold a pup by whoever told him that story. This is certainly not true. In our discussions with the Northern Irish Government, they themselves were reluctant and did not I think at that stage believe that they were going to have to call out the B-specials. No, there's no truth in that story at all. But what we now want to see is the B-specials phased out of the situation. They're already out of the areas where the British troops are and progressively they will be phased out of the areas where up to now they've been exercising riot control duties and so on, because that is not where they ought to be. And, of course, the next question, their disarmament, this is a matter entirely for the General Officer commanding the British troops in Northern Ireland, ^{it} is his responsibility and I think we can leave it safely to him.

MCKENZIE: And therefore never again could you get raiding parties into the Bogside and so on, by the R.U.C?

WILSON: I think that is now out, ^{as} long as the British troops are there and when the British troops move out we shall have discussed with Northern Ireland the civilian control to take over, and we shall want to be absolutely certain before the British troops move out - I don't want to keep them there a day longer than necessary - we shall be absolutely certain that there is a strictly impartial police authority in charge.

MCKENZIE: Now has there been any consultation with Catholic opinion before arriving at this new programme? You know, they see this government as wholly unrepresentative of themselves, have you been in any way trying to be sure that Catholic opinion will go along with this programme?

JM