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1st March, 1971

Interview given by the Taoiseach, Mr. John Lynch T.D.,  
on the BBC Current Affairs Programme "Panorama" on  
Monday, 1st March, 1971

Interviewer (Andrew Mulligan)

Taoiseach, the IRA is an illegal organisation in the Republic as well as in Northern Ireland. Why are its militants not in jail?

Taoiseach

Well, the IRA certainly is an illegal organisation and on any occasion that we find they breach the law here we take action against them. It is not always easy to get evidence of illegal activities of the nature that the IRA indulge in and therefore it is not always very easy to get convictions. But that is the simple answer. We have gone very far on occasion in relation to the IRA. Quite recently, as you know, I announced the possible introduction of internment against them because of the difficulties I have just referred to.

Interviewer

Now, if the situation deteriorated in the North and internment were introduced in the North would you be prepared to take similar measures here?

Taoiseach

Only in circumstances that would be justified here. I hope it will not be necessary to take internment action in the North and equally that it will not be necessary to take action here. We have taken action in former years. As recently as 1956/57/58 there was internment in force and again during the war. So we have demonstrated our determination to take appropriate action when the occasion arises.

Interviewer

But don't you feel that because of events in the North at the moment that it is perhaps a good moment to put IRA militants inside?

Taoiseach

I don't think it is at the moment, now. The situation is much more serious in the North and they have not taken such action.



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Interviewer

It is a fact, isn't it, that there are extreme Republicans in your Party and it sometimes looks as though you have trimmed your policies to take them into account? Do you think that that charge is fair?

Taoiseach

Well I won't accept that it is a fact that there are extreme republicans in our Party - if by extreme republicans you mean the IRA type. There are no such people. But there are people who feel about the division of our country with different intensities of feeling and they give expression to these feelings in different ways.

Interviewer

You said last week that the reforms in the North are going well. But you also said, and I quote you "the reforms attack the obvious symptoms but will not solve the underlying problems". What are these problems?

Taoiseach

I said that you cannot just legislate for reforms only. There must be a will; there must be a will on the part of those who are in control of the situation in the North to make these reforms effective. One of the difficulties that I saw at the present time, one of the shortfalls in these reforms, is that there continues a very high rate of unemployment in Northern Ireland and by far the highest rate of unemployment is amongst the Catholic minority, rising as high as 30 to 33% in some areas. These are the kind of things I think ought to be eliminated, and legislation alone will not eliminate these defects, or these kinds of discriminations.

Interviewer

Isn't there some justification in Major Chichester-Clark's charge that the Republic is sometimes seen to be interfering in an area over which it has no legal or constitutional jurisdiction?

Taoiseach

I want to say this, that we never abandoned our right to speak in relation to events that happen throughout the whole country. Ireland is one nation. There are Irishmen living North and South of the Border. We feel we are entitled to speak for them

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in many areas and we here would never abandon that right and that entitlement. Indeed the British Government have acknowledged our right to come to them and to speak on their behalf [Irishmen in the North] on certain occasions and we have done so very successfully. As far as intervention is concerned I think it is necessary because we have to try and reassure the minority up there. One occasion recently was Dr. Hillery's visit to the Falls Road area. That had the desired effect. It gave the minority up there a feeling of assurance - a feeling that somebody is interested in them.

Interviewer

They gave the majority a feeling that you were interfering. Was that a risk worth taking?

Taoiseach

I think it was, and it was justified in the event, and that wasn't the only one. I have spoken publicly on numerous occasions in relation to events that happened in the North or in relation to events that I thought might happen unless I had intervened. When it comes to the Unionists' own position, effectively they claim jurisdiction over the whole territory of Northern Ireland whereas physically they are in the majority only in less than half that area. And there are certain aspects of their recent administration where I thought I certainly had a right to intervene. For example, the creation of gun clubs which were composed mainly of ex-members of the B-Specials. I think that was a highly irresponsible thing to do - to issue licences to these people to have arms legally in the situation in the North. That is one occasion that I felt that I was not only entitled to speak, but I was bound in conscience and morally to speak.

Interviewer

But is there any real hope of reunification which is fundamental to you when the Government in the North consider that Partition is fundamental to them?

Taoiseach

Well, Partition when it was first introduced was never regarded as a permanent solution to the so-called Irish problem and we

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believe that it is fundamental to the difficulties that will be recurring in Ireland unless we can solve this problem.

I don't believe it is fundamental.....

Interviewer

But they believe it is.

Taoiseach

They do, yes; they believe it is. The Unionists up there want to be British but nevertheless they claim also to be Irish and the Irish are one nation and as one nation they ought to live together. Surely that is a fundamental principle. There can't be two nations and when they are one I can assure them that we can accommodate their affiliation to Britain in some way.

Interviewer

Well, what room is there to manoeuvre when Major Chichester-Clark is on record as saying "we mean to maintain inviolate our link with Britain"? What common ground is there between you?

Taoiseach

Well, there is common ground to the extent that the British Government - two successive British Governments - through their Prime Ministers, Mr. Wilson and now Mr. Heath, both have said that in effect they have no vested interest in maintaining the Partition of Ireland, that as a Government they would be glad - they would be willing - to accommodate any coming together of Irishmen as long as there was agreement in Ireland about it.

Interviewer

What you are really saying is that the Unionists who, for the moment, are the majority in the North, would have to dis-inherit some of the most basic elements of their policy.

Taoiseach

Dis-inherit, yes, perhaps, but on the other hand they must realise that they are living in Ireland. They have been living in Ireland for over 350 years now.

Interviewer

Do you seriously think that the Border might disappear in your lifetime?



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Taoiseach

I couldn't say that it will. I know it is going to be a long haul. It is going to be a difficult process, and nobody has ever envisaged it as being anything else. But, nevertheless, it has been in existence now for 50 years. It hasn't produced the kind of society in the North that any normal democracy would like to see. I don't think, as long as it continues, it can produce a reasoned reasonable society - normal living. You can't continue to have armies in the street maintaining peace. That is not democracy, and the development of no State, no country, can go on in a meaningful way as long as this is necessary.

Interviewer

Major Chichester-Clark said this week that the whole atmosphere of Irish relations could be transformed if you abandoned your Constitution's claim to jurisdiction over the North. Is there any room for manoeuvre there?

Taoiseach

I am afraid not. This is fundamental to our thinking. As I said already to you we are one nation and we regard in our Constitution that the Irish territory is Ireland as a whole and its territorial seas. I speak in that respect for the great majority of the people living in this island. It is a small island, and I don't think that it is right, natural or just that it should be partitioned as it is. Therefore, when I speak for the great majority of our people, even if I were so inclined, I could not abandon that claim, and personally I would not want to.