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URGENT

Report No. M. 22

Transmitted on RTE TV.1 - Today Tonight

Length

Date 17.5.88

Time 9.30 pm

Short Title Interview with Mr. Jim Molyneux.

John Bowman:

... But first Northern Ireland, the two dominant political parties in Ireland of this century, Fianna Fail and the Ulster Unionists, have traditionally kept their distance. Except for a brief period in the mid 1960s following on the Lemass/O'Neill Talks of January 1965, there has largely been mutual suspicion and hostility between both camps. Now in the very changed context of the 6th month period, during which the workings of the Anglo-Irish Agreement are to be reviewed, there is talk of an exchange of position papers, even of a possible summit between the Taoiseach and the official Unionist leader Jim Molyneux. At the weekend Mr. Molyneux was the first Unionist politician to publically praise Mr. Haughey on London Weekend Television, Weekend World. Una Claffey has been talking to Mr. Molyneux in Belfast.

Una Claffey:

You have talked about an alternative to the Agreement. Now traditionally the position of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party has been that you will not enter into any discussions until the Agreement is suspended, have you moved from that position, are you prepared to enter discussions while the Agreement is still in place?

Mr. Jim Molyneux:

There's a difference between discussions and negotiations and I think it would be quite wrong to enter into negotiations as to what sort of structures we are going to have in Northern Ireland, or even what sort of relationships we are going to have with the Irish Republic in advance of a willingness to set aside the Agreement for the time being. And when I say that I don't mean that we would want to spin out the period unduly for the sake of tricking people into putting the Agreement into cold storage and keeping it there. I mean I think Mr. Paisley and I would settle for a period were the Agreement wouldn't be actively implemented to enable real negotiations to begin. But I think what's in your mind that possibly there could be certain contracts of sounding out operations which could precede even that, and that wouldn't be reaching our manifesto undertaking.

Una Claffey:

Well would you, for example, be prepared to talk while the Anglo-Irish Conference is meeting, or would you look for a suspension of the Conference first?

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Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Well it all compares if you're going to have a round table conference or some kind of summit. My view has always been a wee bit jaundiced as far as summits are concerned and round table conferences, round table conferences particularly, because if you put parties around a table and you ask them all what their position is, you put them into political slip trenches from which they can't move afterwards. It's far far better to let the whole operation take shape, gel, come together, whatever you like and then for the Secretary of State, because he has the primary responsibility, then to say, well counting the voices I assess the position to be such and such and so and so, and then perhaps to bring forward proposals which we mightn't, any of us, unreservedly accept but which would have a kind of common dominator situation.

Una Claffey:

So if we take it that your position on summitry or round table conferences is one that sees such a conference, perhaps happening, way down the road when other things have been worked out. That creates a situation which the obvious way for people to move would be, if you like, in a bilateral fashion, that you could talk to the SDLP, you could talk to Dublin, the SDLP could talk to Dublin, is that the direction in which you're moving?

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Yes I think that's possible if things develop to that point, but I think when you say talk to Dublin, you're sort of implying that should be to the exclusion of our own British government. I think that given that they're both committed to this particular Agreement and neither can unilaterally repudiate it, I think it would make sense to keep them both informed in tandem. You see I think one of the weaknesses of the past 2 years, since the Agreement was signed, particularly since we began our discussions, there seems to be a mark of reluctance on the part of the British government to inform the Dublin government of the limited requests which we were making, and I think that that's not healthy, I think that's got to be resolved.

Una Claffey:

Well surely that creates a situation in which, a position where the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, has said he's very anxious to talk to Unionists, would be an ideal opportunity for you to speak directly to h:

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so that misunderstanding can be wiped away and you can have a direct contact even in an informal way with him.

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Well I've made it fairly clear over the last 4 months, it's not just something that's happened this week, that I'm not in the business of snubbing the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, and I think he reciprocates from what I can judge from his statements. I do not think that it would be particularly profitable to have that kind of summit right at the beginning, and I think there are other ways of conveying the messages and providing the clarification other than the Prime Minister and the Leader of a party...

Una Claffey:

There does seem to be a certain cat and mouse game being played here, as you say, over 4 months. You both had indicated, you both have hinted, not only that you would be prepared, but that in fact you would see it as being positive to talk, now is there no way in which talks of that nature could take place without it being in the context of the summit, can it not be an informal...

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Secret meeting which would arouse suspicions and all the rest of it?
With respect I don't think that it's fair to label our contacts such as they've been up until now, smoke signals if you like, as cat and mouse games. I think there has been a very healthy development in that there isn't now the slanging match which we used to have between Belfast and Dublin. I think that's good for starters, and I think in our very different ways the two of us have contributed to that.

Una Claffey:

You have said Mr. Molyneaux that you found in parts of Westminster a blind unreasoning hatred of Mr. Haughey, where in Westminster?

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Everywhere, in all parties.... It's unreasoning that's why I say that it is not based on anything particularly, they don't know the man. I mean Mr. Haughey doesn't need me to defend him, I'm simply saying when faced with the question, do I go along with that, I say no because I've said that he is a tough ruthless efficient statesman, but I don't see that he should be labelled as the villain of the peace simply because he is

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capable of doing a job, otherwise the people of the Irish Republic wouldn't have elected him to the position.

Una Claffey:

Do you believe him when he says he's anxious to talk to Unionists?

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Yes I think that he is genuine and sincere and all of that.

Una Claffey:

Are there in fact unofficial contacts between yourself and the DUP and the Dublin government about the possibility of some kind of talks?

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

No I know that there are people who, wearing other hats, and not going as emissaries of me or vice versa, do have contacts in Dublin, business men and journalists and all sorts of people and so forth. And I think there's a good deal of information being conveyed that way, not by their acting as messengers, but I think it was Mr. Haughey and I, if you like, changing the atmosphere, getting rid of the slanging match which we used to have, and I think it's possible then for those other people then to do a constructive job and that's the sort of thing I would like to see develop.

Una Claffey:

So how would you describe the current climate between Dublin and Belfast?

Mr. Jim Molyneaux:

Well the temperature is certainly much lower than it used to be, and I think that's because there is more realism in Dublin than there is for example in Whitehall, in the Whitehall Civil Service, given that they're a law unto themselves, and given that they have a very weird idea of what Britain's interests are and so forth, and given that they don't talk the same language as Ulster men or Southern Irish men, it's English but it's a different form of English, you need an interpreter in other words.

John Bowman:

And there may be some developments there later in the week.