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Anglo-Irish Meeting, Dublin Castle,

3 December, 1993

Press Conference - Transcript

TAOISEACH:

We started off by clearing the air between the Prime Minister and myself and between our colleagues and the other Ministers on their side - the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dick Spring and Maire-Geoghegan-Quinn, Minister for Justice and on the Prime Minister's side, Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary and Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Northern Ireland Secretary.

We had long and frank discussions. We have cleared the air. And then we got down to the real business of the day which in the first instance was of course Northern Ireland and its problems. While the Prime Minister and myself were at that, the other Ministers took the opportunity of dealing with other issues that were on the agenda and we came back to them later on this evening - between the whole lot of us. We discussed the European Council up-coming next week and of course the GATT talks. In relation to Northern Ireland, we got through quite a lot of very serious work today and very productive work. We still have commissioned more work to be done. We never expected that the road was going to be easy. We always believed there would be road blocks along the way and difficulties along the way. We anticipate some of them, some of them we don't. But nevertheless we are committed to the objective of trying to produce an agreed statement that hopefully would be a formula for peace and will command support across both communities which, at the end of the day, have to live together. We have commissioned more work on the areas still to be resolved. We made quite a considerable amount of progress today and we will review our position next week in Brussels. In the meantime, officials from both Governments will continue the work that is there.

I'll now ask the Prime Minister to say a few words.

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

Well I think the Taoiseach made clear we've have had some very frank discussions today and we have also made some very useful progress on the back of them. We had during the day six Ministers spending seven hours together discussing a range of important problems. When the Taoiseach and I met in London early last year, we set ourselves on that occasion twin objectives. Firstly, to bring about the permanent cessation of violence and also, to establish the basis for a lasting political settlement. We have been and are continuing to work hard to achieve those objectives. When we met in Brussels a week or so ago, we both agreed that any initiative in this area should only be undertaken by the two Governments and there can be no question of us adopting the results of other non-governmental exercises. This is a responsibility for Governments and we are both quite clear about that. Both Governments remain committed to the talks process. Today we have shared a range of ideas about the prospects of achieving a permanent end to the violence. We both have been working today on a Joint Statement - a statement consistent with our principles and wider responsibilities to both communities; a statement that will address our understanding of constitutional realities and political policies. There is no question of bargaining for an end to the violence. Both of us made that entirely clear at Brussels and we re-endorse that today. The Provisional IRA present themselves as interested in securing peace. Yet they have failed, sickeningly failed, to deliver an end to the violence and I believe they should do so at once. We have agreed today that there is scope for further discussions to continue our work on the Joint Statement. That will be taken forward in the first instance very speedily by officials who I would expect to meet early next week. I am then looking forward to meeting the Taoiseach again in Brussels at the European Council at the end of next week. At that time, we will take stock of progress and decide how to take it forward. It has been a useful day today. There was a lot to be done. Some has been done. There is more yet that remains to be done.

(Donal Kelly from RTE)

Taoiseach, you have stressed that you seek British acknowledgement of the right of Irish people living on this island to self-determination based on consent North and South. Have you managed to persuade the Prime Minister of the legitimacy of that position?

TAOISEACH:

We are not going to go into the details of our discussions here. Indeed, the end objective is to find a formula that hopefully can bring a permanent cessation of violence. In relation to the question of any change in the status of Northern Ireland, I have indeed repeatedly made our position abundantly clear and that is that there can be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of people living there. That is our position, quite clear, unequivocal and nobody need question it any further. In relation to any other issues that arose, of course we had many issues, of course we had some very difficult questions to put to each other and of course there are more difficult questions still to be answered. But at the end of the day peace is paramount.

(Michael Brunson)

Prime Minister, can I ask you, indeed can I ask you both, you have made clear that the Joint Statement will obviously have to consider the issue of consent in the North, are you both agreed that it would also have to address the matter of Constitutional change in the South?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

I think, as the Taoiseach said a moment or so ago, we have been discussing today all the matters that need to be discussed. Many of them have advanced in our discussion today, some of them have not. Neither of us are going to go into the details of either the points that are agreed or the points that are outstanding. Our objective is to continue with those discussions - firstly at official level, perhaps then to take further stock in Brussels and then thereafter there may well be further meetings. We are committed to finding an agreement to the matters that are outstanding between us. Neither of us believe that airing any of those matters publicly in advance of that agreement is going to make that agreement any easier to reach. So I am afraid that I have nothing further to add than that.

TAOISEACH:

Michael, I will just add in relation to the Irish Government's position - I have made that quite clear a number of occasions - and that is if at the end of the talks process, which is a separate process to the peace process that we are engaged in, or the peace initiative, if at the end of that process a balanced agreement is the outcome, the Irish government, and I repeat on their behalf, the Irish government will be prepared to put to the Irish people the agreement for their approval and whatever that may entail.

Geraldine Kennedy:

Following the Taoiseach's statement about Unionist consent, I would like to ask the Prime Minister if he is prepared to acknowledge and give parity to the legitimacy of the aspirations of Nationalists in Northern Ireland?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

We are discussing all these methods. We are discussing the natural aspirations of both communities, whether the natural aspirations of the Republicans, the natural aspirations of the Unionists. All these are the matters we are discussing but I don't think we are going to say very much about them until we reach conclusions.

(Eamon Mallie)

Prime Minister, Sir, could I just ask you as 'joint persuaders', are you intending to join the 'persuaders' and what do you mean by that? And to the Taoiseach, I would like to ask: When you talk about a formula for the permanent cessation, what do you mean and what does Mr. Major mean or does he understand that phrase from you?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

I think permanent cessation of violence has only one clear meaning. That it is clear that the men of violence have indicated that they are not going to continue with the way of violence. There is no possibility of misunderstanding of what is meant by either of us over the question of cessation of violence. None whatever. As far as joining the persuaders is concerned, we have made it clear from the outset that we don't see that as the role of the British Government.

(Leo Enright)

Gentlemen, can I just clarify this statement? Do we take it that there will be a statement? Can you give us some idea when we might expect to see that Statement? And can you be specific as to what exactly you hope this Statement will achieve?. A ceasefire by one particular group, by all groups? But I am particularly interested to know if you have committed yourselves today to issuing a statement?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

You can now see the extent to which we are both working together. Go on, you go first.

TAOISEACH:

We have committed ourselves today ... After a long and arduous day, and a good day and a lot of progress made, we have indeed achieved progress today. We have commissioned more serious work. We have always said there are difficulties ahead. We have never made any excuses for that. We said they are there. We have commissioned more work. We will review the progress of that work in Brussels and we will take it from there. It is one step at a time. At the end of the day, it is our objective. And we are both committed to trying to produce an agreed statement at the end of the period that hopefully will command the respect and the support of both communities and hopefully lead to a cessation of violence that can then open up the way for the talks process to have a far better chance in a changed environment. We want to stop the killing. Both of us want to stop the killing. What we committed ourselves to two weeks after I became Taoiseach is that if we were to do anything for the divided communities in the North, it was to try to end

that conflict up there and give the people a better way of life for the future and a better quality of life. We are as committed to that today as we were the first day we met.

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

I think the last point is worth reiterating again. This isn't something that we have started on as a result of any events over recent months. This is something that we committed ourselves to seeking, not necessarily the mechanism of seeking it, but something we committed ourselves to seeking on the first occasion we met in Downing Street a very substantial time ago. Nothing has changed in the interim. We have been looking consistently to see what can be done. As far as the Joint Statement is concerned, we are working on a Joint Statement. We haven't got there yet. So, if evidently we haven't got there yet, a good deal of it I think is now common ground between us. There are still differences between us. We are working to try and resolve those differences. We cannot be certain we will resolve those difficulties. But I can promise you we will do all we can to see whether they can be resolved and, if they can, we will be able to issue a statement.

Did the Prime Minister satisfactorily answer your concerns and the Irish Government's concerns about the recent allegations of documents, critical Anglo-Irish documents, being handed over by the British Government to Sinn Fein?

TAOISEACH:

There was some straight talking today. Some very frank talking today. And after a period of time, we put those issues aside and got on with the real business of the day because, as I said, peace is paramount. That is what has to be the objective. We are not denying that there was a strong exchange of views on both sides in relation to them. But beyond that, as I say, we put them aside and got on with the real business of today and that is to continue our search for a peace formula.

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

For those of you who just came into the room today with frustrations of events over recent days - over the last week to a fortnight - both of us came into

the room with frustrations about that: But we are determined to work together, if we can, to achieve a satisfactory solution and a satisfactory outcome. The first thing to do was to lay to rest those concerns that have arisen over the last fortnight or so. We did so satisfactorily this morning in private. What we are now concerned with is moving forward. That's all you're getting.

Prime Minister, the Taoiseach has talked about the possibility of peace before Christmas. Now, do you believe that at the end of this series of meetings, which you have embarked upon, that you might be able to subscribe to a joint statement which will do what he wants?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

Well, whether we get peace for Christmas - everyone would like peace, we would have liked peace some time ago. There is absolutely no doubt about that. At the end of the day whether there is peace - whatever the Joint Statement we produce - depends upon whether those people who disrupt peace are prepared to stop. Ultimately it is for the IRA to decide that they are going to stop and other Loyalist Paramilitaries to make sure that they are going to stop. Ultimately the decision is theirs. There is always a danger that people actually lose track as we talk of who is actually doing the killing. It is they who should stop and I hope they will stop immediately. There is no reason for them not to.

TAOISEACH:

We have continued to work for peace at the earliest possible date. Everybody recognises that there have been difficulties put in our way. There have been developments in recent times that were not helpful towards the peace process. We have to overcome those difficulties. And I have no doubt that there will be more difficulties that we can't anticipate put in our way. But it is up to the two Prime Ministers and the two Governments to try and prevent those difficulties and indeed not be deflected off the path that we have chosen. And that is the path of peace.

Arising out of those differences and the fact that you both said you had straight talking, could I ask the Prime Minister if the contact between the

British Government and the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein will continue during the period of the talks between yourself and the Taoiseach and could I ask the Taoiseach if he made any such request today?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

I don't think that people perhaps have fully taken on board the nature of the contacts. The British Government was approached by the IRA with the statement that we issued and we subsequently published the exchanges between us. What has happened is that we have indicated to them privately that our public position is our real position. That is the position. It hasn't been a question of negotiation with the IRA. It has been a question of responding to their questions and confirming to them that our public position is our private position. I don't know if they are going to ask me any more questions. That is a question for them.

TAOISEACH:

I am satisfied from what I have heard from the Prime Minister today that it will not interfere with the continuation of our talks process.

Can I ask you ... You referred Prime Minister to having reached agreement on certain points. Can you amplify on which areas you did reach agreement, and did it extend to the formula for self-determination? I mean, are you essentially going to build on existing statements like the Spring principles?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

Well it's an extremely ingenious way of finding out the areas where we haven't agreed and if I may simply admire the way in which you put the question without responding to it.

Prime Minister, do you think that any agreement between the two Governments must be acceptable to the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland? Do you think this is an agreement - like the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 - that could be settled without the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

We are never going to get a permanent settlement of the troubles in Northern

Ireland unless we are able to carry the consent of the people of Northern Ireland with us. That has never been a point in dispute between the Taoiseach and I.

TAOISEACH:

These are two different communities with two different identities, two different cultures, two different traditions. Our challenge and the challenge to both of us in both Governments is to find accommodation for those different traditions, different identities and different cultures so that the people can work out a way of working together, living together, and get rid of the violence out of that society.

Prime Minister, could I ask you to address yourself to the Northern Unionists who may be concerned about the track that you are on at the moment? And could you say whether or not you would agree anything with Mr. Reynolds without the prior agreement of Mr. Molyneux?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

I am here talking Government to Government to the Taoiseach. That is the status of the discussions that we are having. But we are both aware of the need to retain the consent of the people of Northern Ireland and the communities in Northern Ireland, both of them. We are aware of that in every moment of our discussions.

TAOISEACH:

Our commitment and our approach to the whole initiative and indeed the proposals are grounded on agreement and consent. And we want to continue to address the message to the Unionist community in the North of Ireland that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority. And that the present peace initiative is grounded on those principles which indeed should be a consolation to those that have genuine fears and genuine uncertainty as to what we are trying to do. There is no hidden agenda between us behind our backs. We seek peace and we will have the talks afterwards.

In your continuing contacts with the IRA, Prime Minister, will you be keeping the Dublin Government informed, given that they were furious that they weren't kept in the picture previously?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

What continuing contacts with the IRA?

You suggested that the lines of communication are open and therefore contact may continue?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

The lines are there if the IRA wish to send out messages as they have done in the past. I don't know if they will avail themselves of that. As the Taoiseach has said, I don't think that that is going to affect the discussions between the two Governments.

Taoiseach, you have said that time is not on your side in relation to this peace process that you are now engaged in. When for you is the final deadline? Is it before Christmas or what? When is the final deadline when this unique opportunity runs out?

TAOISEACH:

We are not into deadlines. We have continued to express the urgency of the matter. One more death is one too many. That is the urgency of it and as soon as we can get an agreement between us, we won't delay. We will work day and night - as our officials will work day and night - because what we want to do is not to dwell on the last atrocity but try and prevent the next one.

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

We want to get an agreement, if we can, as speedily as we can. If we can't, then we will continue to try on and on and on. This isn't something that is suddenly going to be cut off. Until such time as there is a solution to the difficulties, it is incumbent upon the two Governments to continue to look and see if they can find such a solution.

Prime Minister, can I ask you a question on a different subject? Can you make any comment about the Princess of Wales reducing her official engagements and whether this in any way alters the Constitutional position outlined in the House of Commons by yourself?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR:

Well I understand of course and sympathise with the reasons given by the Princess of Wales for her decision today. I hope she will, as she has asked, be given the opportunity to combine a suitable public role with a more private life. I think that that would be the wish of most people.

Prime Minister, Taoiseach, you have said there is a possibility that you may not reach agreement this time around. What do you think the consequences of failure to agree this time around might be? Do you think there would be serious immediate repercussions?

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

Well one consequence is that we keep on trying.

TAOISEACH:

The other one is that it is better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all.

Taoiseach, can I ask you what single thing that Mr. Major can do which would most help the process of bringing about a peace agreement? And can I ask the Prime Minister what single thing the Taoiseach can now do which would most pave the way to that agreement?

TAOISEACH:

I think after this long meeting today, both of us are well aware of what each of us believe are the crunch issues in this particular process and will continue to try and find agreement on them.

P.M. JOHN MAJOR

Taoiseach, I have nothing to add to that.