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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

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(27)

Interview with Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew
on Radio Ulster, "Inside Politics" Saturday 9 October, 1993

Interviewer: Good afternoon. The Prime Minister went out of his way yesterday speaking at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool to reassure Unionists that Northern Ireland's constitutional position would not be changed without the consent of its people. Mr Major insisted his Government would not bargain away those democratic rights, or any part of them, to appease those who seek to rule by the bomb and the bullet. There was no direct reference to the Hume/Adams talks but the Prime Minister said no Government he led would negotiate with those who perpetrate or support the use of violence. Mr Hume himself returned to Ireland earlier in the week from a jobs promotion visit to the United States. His first task was to brief the Irish Government on his talks with the President of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams. He had undertaken those talks on his own initiative and was not acting as an emmissary from anyone. The Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds emerged from the meeting to say he had been given a document by John Hume which could provide a basis for a peace process. His apparent enthusiasm for the talks was welcomed by both Mr Hume and Mr Adams. It now seems likely that the Irish Government will raise the Sinn Fein/SDLP proposals with the British Government later this month at the next Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental meeting. When I spoke to Sir Patrick Mayhew towards the end of his Party Conference in Blackpool, I asked if he wanted to see those proposals.

Secretary of State: I have said that if, ever since this business began, that if the Irish wish to show me some document, I should be very foolish if I said no, goodness me, take the thing away, I am not even going to look at it. Of

course I will look at it. But, as I have often said, whether I am impressed by it at all is quite a different matter.

Interviewer: I understand that. But even if you do look at it, there are people in this community, this society who will say that you would be engaged in negotiations.....

Secretary of State:they'd be quite wrong.

Interviewer:with the political wing of the IRA by the back door.

Secretary of State: Well that would be absolute rubbish. They would be quite wrong, and I have said so before, and I shall say so if they are ever unwise enough to say that to me.

Interviewer: You make a distinction?

Secretary of State: Of course it is a silly thing to say. I have made it perfectly clear that there is no question of negotiating with any organisation that either perpetrates terrorism or justifies it. So, I mean, lets have no doubt about that. I do think people have a great burden of responsibility if they are in leadership in public life, who set about stirring up anxieties and fears where there is no basis for them. There is quite enough anxiety, suspicion and fear in our society in Northern Ireland without wantonly going about it in circumstances where it is quite unjustified.

Interviewer: And you are saying that people who would say that you are, if you look at this document, at one remove negotiating with Sinn Fein, they are stirring up fears.

Secretary of State: Yes I do say that.

Interviewer: Unjustified and unwarranted.

Secretary of State: Yes I do say that. I have made it perfectly clear. I mean just to take, just to test the thing,

to show its absurdity. Supposing the Irish Government were to show me a document which begins with the only message that I am interested in from the IRA, violence is over. Not a ceasefire. Permanently over, that's it. It would be ridiculous, wouldn't it, if I was to say, I am sorry, I am not interested in that, I am not going to look at it, because somehow or other it is tainted by the means by which it has arrived. It is ridiculous to describe that as negotiation. I really do feel rather cross that peoples' anxieties and suspicions are being stirred up in this quite unjustified way.

Interviewer: And you are saying, just now, that the only message you are interested in from Sinn Fein and the IRA is one which says the violence is going to stop.

Secretary of State: Yes. I am not just saying that now. I have said that for a long time. I have said that is the only message I am interested in. If they do that and if they show that they mean it, that it is for keeps, that it is for real, that they satisfy a lot of extremely sceptical minds I may say, because look at the things that have been happening both in Northern Ireland and in London and elsewhere in recent weeks while all this talk about progress towards peace etc, has been going on. There are a lot of sceptical minds about. If, however, they declare that the violence is over, no conditions, and show over a sufficient period of time that that is for real, then a new story can begin to unfold, I don't doubt.

Interviewer: Can I just put this to you as well, because there are also people in this community who would say that if John Hume and Gerry Adams have produced proposals and if there is the slightest chance that those proposals if considered would lead to an end to violence, you have a duty to look at them very carefully even if the top line is not an end to IRA violence.

Secretary of State: That's a rather different proposal from the one that was being put to me just now, isn't it?

Interviewer: Yes it is.

Secretary of State: Quite the opposite side of the fence. I am quite used to that, because I get shot at from both sides and in the middle as well, and, therefore, you have to analyze your own position and be quite clear on what the proper course of action is, and that is what I try to do. Now in answer to your point. I believe that the 4 Church leaders were absolutely right when they said, speaking jointly, a week or more ago that they think it is damaging and unwise to speculate as to whatever the contents of this document or whatever it is, may be. I am sure it is unwise to speculate on the basis of what if it says this or what if it says the other.

Interviewer: But wouldn't it be wrong of you to miss any opportunity of beginning a process, the beginning of which would lead to an end of IRA violence.

Secretary of State: There is only one opportunity and it is the opportunity which is offered to terrorists and they know it is their opportunity. Their opportunity, if they wish to seek a political objective, is to declare the end of violence. There is no means by which they can contribute to arriving at their political objective, whatever it may be, so long as they either perpetrate violence or justify it. None at all. Absolutely none.

Interviewer: Wouldn't it be silly, though, of John Hume, considering that he is a politician of long standing, to give you a document unless it would lead to an end to terrorism.

Secretary of State: He is not giving me a document. He hasn't given me a document. He hasn't said he will give me a document. It is a very important point.

Interviewer: But you will look at a document if it is given to you by Dublin.

Secretary of State: I have made it clear that if Dublin says; here is a document, we think you would be interested in seeing, I have made it clear that I think it would be childish for me to say, no I am not going to look at it. But anybody who supposes that there is any kind of lesser condition upon the terrorist organisations than what I have described is absolutely wrong and I cannot understand why they should suppose that there should be a lesser obligation. I read reports today in the papers of evidence given by a Sinn Fein Councillor from South Armagh, in the extradition proceedings in the United States at the moment for a convicted prisoner whose extradition we are seeking. That Sinn Fein Councillor is reported, I only know from the reports, as justifying the murder of certain judges. Justifying that kind of thing, well, that has got to stop. If anybody expects to have any say towards achieving a political objective, that has got to be closed off forever.

Interviewer: If IRA violence were to end, or if there was a promise that it would end. What would you do?

Secretary of State: I should be extremely pleased that the ordinary people of Northern Ireland were going to be spared, if the promise was reliable, the grossly disgusting, cruel and unjust offenses that have been committed against them over so many years. I should be extremely pleased. However, I should want to look very closely to see whether a promise was one that was intended for real. And so, of course, would they.

Interviewer: Can you envisage a process, not necessarily a round table process, which if the IRA campaign ended would involve Sinn Fein?

Secretary of State: Well it would, of course, depend. You see what I think is perhaps a pity over recent weeks is this. That the talks process in which all the four main Constitutional Parties were engaged last year, and, after a certain interval, the Irish Government, together with the British Government, that that process has rather been put on

one side. Now it is that process into which an enormous amount of work has been put, and in which, substantial progress has been made. It is that process which offers the real way of achieving a political agreement. Now if others who are excluded from it at the moment, wish to be included in it, then they know what they have got to do. It doesn't rest I may say with the British Government. It wouldn't rest with the Irish Government. It would rest with all the other participants as to whether they are prepared to sit down. But I always recall the words of Mr Dick Spring, the Irish Foreign Minister, back in March of this year, when he said; "look if you are in a constitutional country, a democratic country, you cannot reasonably be expected to sit down at the table and discuss matters of this character with people who, when it suits them, are prepared to reinforce their arguments with bombs. I endorse that, absolutely.

Interviewer: But are you suggesting that if IRA violence ended, there would be a place in that at some point for Sinn Fein.

Secretary of State: I have always said that if violence ends, no question of a ceasefire with its threat of resumption, you know if you don't fall in in the meantime, a cessation of violence, a complete end to violence, and it is shown to be for real over a sufficient period of time to satisfy a lot of sceptical minds. I have always said that a new story, a new scene could then unfold. It would depend upon all the participants to the talks that were taking place last year, and which are by no means dead I may say.

Interviewer: Secretary of State, we also have the intensification of loyalist violence and the threat that they will hold the nationalist community to ransom for the Hume/Adams initiative. What do you say to them, and is there anything you can do to reassure the nationalist community?

Secretary of State: Well, I have already said to them what I want to say to them, because what I have just said applies

equally to terrorists of any character, no matter which flag they disgrace by what they do. Anybody with a political objective living in a free society, living in a democracy has the means open to him or her to achieve it peacefully. And by constitutional advocacy, and the kind of work which constitutional politicians do. Nobody who reckons that they are going to speed the day when their political objective is achieved if they use violence has begun to understand the character of the British Government.

Interviewer: What do you say to a Unionist community which feels its position threatened by the Hume/Adams initiative?

Secretary of State: Well, I would say first of all, show the steadiness that is characteristic of Ulster people. Secondly, understand and accept the quite unequivocal, quite unconditional assurance that I have given on the part of the British Government, that the Prime Minister has given on behalf of the British Government, that there is only one act of self-determination that will decide the status of Northern Ireland and that is the people of Northern Ireland's act of self-determination. That has been made clear over many years. It is my position. It is the Government's position. It will remain the Government's position.

Interviewer: And that will not change?

Secretary of State: Well, I think you can be quite sure that that is what I have said.

Interviewer: Isn't there another difficulty in all of this and it is the dependence in some circumstances of the Government on Unionist votes in the House of Commons. Now doesn't that mean that you couldn't give any meaningful concessions to Nationalists because of the influence Unionists have because of that on Government policy.

Secretary of State: Well I think you overstate that. The Government has an overall majority in the House of Commons

albeit it is a small one. Nothing has changed from the day when the election results were disclosed and so that is the position.

Interviewer: Indeed I must put it to you. Some Unionists, fairly prominent Unionists, feel that you are dependent on them?

Secretary of State: Well, you put it to them.

Interviewer: Mr Molyneux said the other day that there didn't have to be a deal because Mr Major and he understood each other. That would indicate some kind of collaboration.

Secretary of State: I think it indicates exactly what he said. That they understand each other. They understand, for example, that the Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty would have been an absolute disaster for businesses in Northern Ireland, as for anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It would have caused jobs to be lost on a very large scale. They understand very well that they do not wish, they understand very well that the Labour Government is committed to working for a United Ireland which means a Northern Ireland which is outside the United Kingdom. They say that they want that to be achieved with consent, but a Labour Government would join the ranks of persuaders and they know very well that a Conservative Government does not think it right to seek to persuade people in Northern Ireland to leave the United Kingdom. The Conservative Government believes it is a matter wholly for the people of Northern Ireland to decide. And at the moment their views are very clear.

Interviewer: If that was a request in the Hume/Adams proposals, you would reject it?

Secretary of State: It is beyond any question at all. I have said time and time again, that the status of Northern Ireland is absolutely secure because it is based upon the wishes of the greater number of people living in Northern Ireland who

include, may I say, a substantial proportion of Catholics. Now the British Government is going to stand behind the democratically declared wishes of the people of Northern Ireland and that is the position, it is not going to change.

Interviewer: The Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, speaking to me there from Blackpool during the Conservative Party Conference.