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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

BÉALFEIRSTE

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FROM: Aingéal O'Donoghue
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Mr. J. Finlay
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ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST
(17)

Press Conference by Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew
and interview with John Hume, SDLP
BBC Radio Ulster, 28 November 1993

Secretary of State:

The Government's position has long been made perfectly clear by the Prime Minister and by myself over a long period of time that nobody has been authorised to undertake talks or negotiations on behalf of the Government with the IRA, with Sinn Fein, with any organisation that undertakes terrorism, undertakes violence, for political purposes. That has remained the case and it is the case today. We received at the end of February a message coming from the leadership of the IRA which is the subject of a statement that the Northern Ireland Office put out yesterday. It said the conflict is over and it said that they needed advice, and that's to say British advice, as to how it could be brought to a close.

I have certain responsibilities and first and foremost among those is the responsibility for every single life in Northern Ireland. It was necessary to decide what, if any, response should be made to them. It was necessary to decide whether they were to be brushed aside - you know we don't have any contact with people like this - or whether we should say "Very well, we will give you such advice as you say you need". I do not believe, had I made no response, I do not believe had the Government made no response, that if subsequent bombs were exploded and lives were taken and people were injured, as indeed was the case, I would have been readily forgiven by the people of Northern Ireland. There are responsibilities lying upon those in Government from which those who criticise from outside are deeply protected and to which they are immune. Accordingly, a response was sent and an important feature of that response was this: the position of the British Government on dealing with those who espouse violence is clearly understood. This is why the envisaged sequence of events is

important. We note that what is being sought at this stage is advice and that any dialogue would follow an unannounced halt to violent activity. We confirm that if violence had genuinely been brought to an end whether or not that fact had been announced, then dialogue could take place. That of course is entirely consistent with the long-established policy of the Government. Yesterday there was published, today, I should say, there was published some text in the Observer in London and that text, taken at face value and without knowledge of the context, naturally fuels suspicion that the Government has been negotiating or entering into talks with Sinn Fein or the IRA. It was therefore necessary in my judgement to put into context that text and that is why I authorised the statement to be made yesterday.

Now that statement related to the request for advice which we received at the end of February which I have just mentioned. That came by a channel or chain of communication that has been in place for some years and that channel of communication has been the means of communicating in each direction messages, the value of the chain being that it is confidential. It was important that that chain should remain confidential until there was published a text provided, one must speculate, by the IRA or by Sinn Fein or somebody, calculated to give the impression that the Government had entered into negotiations. I was not prepared to allow confidentiality to be broken in that way, calculated to mislead the public.

Presenter: The Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, speaking a short time ago at the Stormont press conference and he will no doubt be questioned rigorously by the journalists who were there about what word means what, but in the meantime - we will return obviously to Stormont for that questioning - but in the meantime the SDLP leader John Hume is on the line now. Did Sir Patrick Mayhew's explanation seem reasonable to you, John Hume?

Mr. Hume: Well I have just heard his explanation and I'm not given to kneejerk reaction. I will study what he has to say. What I'm saying about the whole thing basically is that it underlines what I've been saying throughout: that there is at

this point in time a major opportunity for a total cessation of violence. I've been saying that throughout. I think it's what he's saying today and what has emerged is underlining that that opportunity exists. And I would want to stress that I have said repeatedly that the process which would lead to that total cessation of violence is a process, and I have to say this very strongly, which threatens no section of our community because, and if you read the statement that was issued by Mr. Adams and myself, read my speech yesterday, making very very clear we're talking about a process involving both Governments and all parties, and the commitment of that process is to reach agreement, agreement among our divided people, an agreement which must earn the allegiance. Now I'm presuming, which I think is not an unfair presumption, that the Unionist people at that table would reach an agreement that is acceptable to their people.

Presenter: Well we are some way from that, John Hume. Let's talk about the more immediate future and this peace process about which so many of are still being kept in the dark by both
you

Mr. Hume: You're not being kept in the dark, I'm just explaining to you and you've just interrupted me while I was explaining to you. I have made numerous statements with Mr. Adams. I made a major speech yesterday in which I set the whole position out. The problem seems to be that people don't want to listen to what's being said. Do you object to the divided people of this country reaching an agreement which has the allegiance of all our traditions? Do you object to the British Government declaring that as their objective, to get agreement among a divided people to which all sections can give their allegiance?

Presenter: But it is reasonable to ask you if, as has been suggested, you and Mr. Adams have some kind of formula to bring that about. It is reasonable for me as a journalist and for the public to ask you, John Hume, to ask what is that formula and why is it being kept from the public?

Mr. Hume: In the first place, I have said repeatedly and Mr. Adams has said repeatedly, we have not come to any secret deal which would be imposed on anyone. We have not discussed solutions. We have discussed a process whereby a solution would be reached and that process would have to involve both Governments and all parties and its objective is agreement. There is no way that I have sat down with Gerry Adams or he with me to decide: here is our solution, we're now going to get the British Government to impose that on everybody. Because that's not a solution. We're a divided people as I keep saying and any solution can only be brought about by agreement and one thing that has never happened is that the parties involved have never sat down to try to reach agreement. The only time we did was at the time of Sunningdale and that was brought down. We have to address is it or is it not true that central to our whole problem is the Unionist people's fear of being subsumed into an Ireland against their will. The one guarantee they have against that ever happening, because if that happened it wouldn't be a solution, the only guarantee they have is their own numbers and their own strength and I'm presuming that if they sit down around the table and reach agreement it would be an agreement that their people could endorse. But whatever form that agreement takes, once the quarrel's over, our people will all start working together and by working together break down the old prejudices and in the future generations a new Ireland will emerge which will, I say,

Presenter: Yes, look, I take your point on that but I think we'd really make more profit and discuss the events of the last twenty-four hours at this stage, I accept your point in terms of political progress. But I want to quote from the Government's press handout that was issued last night and it makes interesting reading. At the end of February this year a message was passed on to the Government from the IRA leadership. It was to the effect that the conflict was over but they needed our advice as to the method of bringing it to a close. What that implies is that the IRA came out with their hands up waving a white flag. Now in terms of your dealings and negotiations or discussions, call it what you will, with Mr. Adams, is that, do you believe, the current

attitude within the IRA, they want to stop but they want to find some way of stopping?

Mr. Hume: I have said repeatedly, repeatedly as a result of the experience of my dialogue that this is the best opportunity for peace that I have seen in twenty years.

Presenter: But John, you say that this is the best opportunity for peace in the last twenty years. I'm asking you a very simple question to which I would like a very simple answer - why is it the best opportunity for peace? That's what the public are asking.

Mr. Hume: Because the dialogue in which I was engaged and it's all in my speech yesterday as well, that the dialogue in which I was engaged convinced me that the people I was talking to were totally serious about wanting a total cessation of violence and on terms which threatened no section of our people. Now if I'm saying that on the record, as I've said repeatedly, then at the end of the day I have to stand over that, and the Government knows what I'm talking about, and the Government knows that it offers no threat to any section of our people. I'm beginning to wonder, listening to some Unionist politicians, do they want violence to stop, because as long as violence is there they can simply point at it, but if there's no violence, for the first time some Unionist parties would have had to address the question: how do we relate to the people whom we live beside here?

Presenter: I will leave that question hanging pregnant, John Hume, thank you very much for joining us.