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Interview with Albert Reynolds

Interviewer: Jim Dougal

+ Interview with *Seán Ó Riada* before

Interviewer: Would the IRA have called the ceasefire without the input of the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams?

Albert Reynolds: No I don't believe they would. Not to my knowledge. I've no inner knowledge of the working of Sinn Fein or indeed the IRA council but I have to say that it took a lot of personal courage, political courage and indeed it's a sign of great leadership to be able to achieve that and of course his talks with John Hume over a period, indeed, contributed in no small way either. So really what you were having was the Nationalists speaking together for the very first time and putting forward this alternative strategy for to move forward their own political objectives and indeed to demonstrate that a political objective could be advanced without the armed conflict.

Interviewer: You moved very quickly to establish the Forum for ground of Peace and Reconciliation and you brought Sinn Fein into that. Now the British Government has been accused of being too slow and too cautious in their whole approach.

Albert Reynolds: I moved a lot faster. I knew that John Major wasn't in a position to move as fast as I was. I set a target of setting up a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation for the end of October and I achieved that. I said I would meet Gerry Adams officially in Government Buildings within a week of a definitive ceasefire. Not a partial ceasefire but a total ceasefire and I did that too. So any of the commitments I had given I wanted to deliver on them so that the peace process could be consolidated and secured, knowing that John Major would not be moving as fast as I was, that he had set a three month period during which he and the British Government

and as he said himself the British people needed to be convinced that it was for real. They didn't accept it at the start but eventually they came round to accept it and now that the historic talks have started between themselves and Sinn Fein, the first time officially in 70 years and you know the loyalists spokespersons for the paramilitaries will be meeting next week. So everything is moving ahead and has to be kept on the move because I think this process has to be managed, it has to be secured for the future and indeed we have to see action by both Governments to ensure that it is secure for future.

Interviewer: Now the point that the British Government are making quite forcefully is that the weapons have to be destroyed and it has to be verified that they have been destroyed before these exploratory talks can lead to talks with British Government Ministers. Do you think they are right?

Albert Reynolds: I think that everybody accepts that there has to be a destruction of the arms on both sides. I think that the paramilitaries, the loyalist paramilitaries and the IRA accept the requirement. But I don't believe either of them would accept it as a unilateral precondition that they would have to be dumped before people see where the process is going. That would be the genuine fear in both communities that things are going to be moved to a conclusion that we will have a just and lasting political settlement as well. I think to set that down as a precondition for talks I think would be very foolish. I think it's unrealistic. I don't think it's a pragmatic approach and how can you verify the destruction of arms or the quantity of arms when you don't know how much is there. So that I think you are going to have to try and move the two sides in parallel in the destruction of arms because both sides have to feel satisfied that both sides are confident that it is being done properly on both sides, and of course there is a huge amount of licenced arms in the society of Northern Ireland, they too have to be taken into consideration and so too has the activity of the British Army. I know that its soldiers are to be seen much less now than

they ever were but I mean they must get back to the ordinary barracks duties and if the security situation is improving as it has been improving over the last four months, what is the requirement for such a heavy British Army in the North of Ireland anyway?

Interviewer: Do you think they should be taken off the streets now?

Albert Reynolds: I do believe they should be taken off because I think that's the sort of action that will add confidence into the whole process from both sides of the community. That they are back to normality. That things have changed and people want to know that and they want to see it. They want to see it on the ground, the small things on the ground can continue to convince people that this is for real and that we are back to normality and we're going to stay at normality and there is an obligation on the British Government and on the Irish Government to do everything they can to make sure that there is no possibility of a return to Irish conflict again.

Interviewer: Well you said it would be better now if the troops were taken off the streets even though the British Government said they must stay there for a while.

Albert Reynolds: Well I don't know what purpose they are serving there. We've had a ceasefire now on both sides. It has been broken down with one person unfortunately killed in Newry. But I mean at this stage everybody is convinced it is for real so what's the purpose of having the British Army patrolling the streets. I mean back in the barracks I would have thought would be a desirable development at this stage.

Interviewer: Now, you say that it's a precondition to ask that weapons be destroyed before Sinn Fein and indeed the Loyalist paramilitaries talk to Government Ministers. Do you think that if it's a precondition it's a threat to the ceasefire?

Albert Reynolds: I think it could seriously be a threat

because everybody enjoys the confidence of each other at the moment. I think there would be a genuine fear that there might not be further movement if, first of all we have two ceasefires in operation, if all the arms were decommissioned or destroyed at the moment and than no settlement emanated at the end of the day, I mean that's a recipe for problems again and I think a really genuine acceptance that the requirement of destruction of arms has to be part of the process and that is on both sides as I understood it. The British Government are entitled to get that feeling of understanding that I got and I hope they do and that they would see it realistically that at the end of the day there won't be a conclusion until the destruction of arms has taken place. But to set it as a precondition I think would be very foolish indeed.

Interviewer: Do you think that Government Ministers should talk to Sinn Fein now?

Albert Reynolds: I believe yes. The three months are up, we should be serious about talks, and talks about talks is not going to find a real solution to the problem. We have an opportunity that hasn't been around for generations to solve the problem once and for all. There is a realism in both communities that there is a better way to do business in the future. I think that everybody wants to sit down around the table and work out a new formula, a new agreed Ireland and that at the end of the day let the future and let the evolution take place. I think that's what people want. Nobody, but nobody, I believe in Northern Ireland wants to see to see a return to where you were four or five months ago.

Interviewer: How far advanced was the Framework Document when you left it?

Albert Reynolds: Very far advanced, very few issues indeed to be resolved and a lot of work done. There needs to be flesh put on the cross border institutions with executive functions. There needs to be a default mechanism put in place and there needs to be the text of changes in legislation in relation to the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the 1973 Act. There needs to be all that sort of thing. But it has been very well

advanced between the liaison committee on both sides and the constitutional position was very close to final decision by both Governments. So that it wouldn't take too long to finish off the Framework Document in my view. I think we made a lot of progress in relation to an all Ireland body that would be drawn from both a Parliament in Belfast and the Parliament in Dublin. That would operate by agreement of consensus to monitor the development of co-operation between North and South which is in the interest of both communities and indeed in both parts of Ireland.

Interviewer: How could you ensure that such a body would be accepted by Unionists?

Albert Reynolds: Well first of all everybody talks about the democratic mandate and I think legislation probably would have to precede some of this development from Whitehall or from the House of Commons and indeed from Dublin. But when the Parliament was established in Belfast that the democratic mandate would be drawn for that into that type of a body. I think, I hope when I say this that there is an acceptance all round, that the question of an internal settlement on its own is not a runner, it won't work, and there is no point in talking about it because things have changed. The majoritarian rule of the past is gone and we have to put in the new institutions that command the support and allegiance of both communities and I think that that's what has to be accepted.

Interviewer: Has the British Government do you think accepted the principle of North/South bodies and an overall all Ireland body?

Albert Reynolds: Well I'm sure you recall Sir Patrick Mayhew going to meetings of the Orange Order and speaking in terms of executive functions for North/South institutions. Yes the principles have been accepted.

Interviewer: And of an all Ireland body?

Albert Reynolds: The principle has been accepted in my view

in relation to it. But how it's going to operate and how it's going to function, the flesh has to be put on that kind of proposal.

Interviewer: What kind of bodies would they be? The North/South bodies?

Albert Reynolds: Well first of all we had a tourism initiative there very recently which indeed bodes well for the future that the tourism prospects for North and South should be done together in a co-operative way and both parts of Ireland will certainly benefit. Indeed the North of Ireland will benefit and the South will benefit. The same goes for investment. This is an area that has to be looked at. There are areas of agriculture, environmental protection, fishery, transport links. There are so many things that we can all do better together and indeed that both of us can benefit from. So that the detail of that is being worked out by the Liaison Committee. The principles have been established but we want the details worked out.

Interviewer: You are quite clear that the British Government has accepted that there will be North/South bodies with some power and an overall all Ireland body?

Albert Reynolds: What we have said is the worst kept secret around that there will be North/South co-operation through institutions with executive functions. That's clear in people's minds.

Interviewer: And an all Ireland body?

Albert Reynolds: And an all Ireland body, that still has to be put flesh on, but basically operating on the basis of consensus maybe applied from each parliament whether they are Ministers or Chairmen of committees or whatever structure is put in place for the Government of Northern Ireland in future. That would be the type of representation one would expect and it will have to operate by consensus.

Interviewer: And from your point of view the British

Government accept that?

Albert Reynolds: The principles are accepted but the details have to be finally put in place.

Interviewer: What about Articles 2 and 3?

Albert Reynolds: Articles 2 and 3, I've made it very clear from the very start and it's part of the Downing Street Declaration, indeed it's the first anniversary of it but it's part of it that Articles 2 and 3 and changes in the Irish constitution would have to be on the basis of a balanced constitutional settlement on both sides as part of an overall agreement and that's the way it would be put to the Irish people at the end of the day. It is a matter for the Irish people to make any changes in the Irish constitution but we have said that we are prepared to put in the consent principle into our constitution and we would expect that the British Government would insert a similar type principle in their legislation that governs the North of Ireland at the moment which is the Government of Ireland Act 1920, section 75, and the 1973 Act or whether it would be a new Act, those are areas for final teasing out. But the consent principle and we were prepared to make the appropriate changes in Article 3 to reflect the new situation on the basis of balanced constitutional approach from both. That final shape has to be worked out between the two Governments but it shouldn't take very long to do it, and if we get an overall settlement, which I hope we do, it has to be one that the Irish people will buy into and that both communities will buy into otherwise there is no point in producing a Framework Document that simply is not going to work.

Interviewer: And you think that the Framework Document will include changes in Northern Ireland's constitution and the way Northern Ireland is governed?

Albert Reynolds: What I'm saying is that there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority. We have accepted that.

Ireland has accepted that for a long time, it's part of an international agreement it's part of the Anglo Irish Agreement. We all accept that but what we are saying is that the Government of Ireland Act needs to be changed or maybe abolished and replaced or whatever and that you know part of the reciprocal situation will be proposals for changes in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, on a balanced constitutional basis otherwise they won't work.

Interviewer: And that's where the Framework Document was when you left it?

Albert Reynolds: That's where it was when I left it and you know I think that it's reasonable to think that in short enough time it could be completed. But that's a matter for the new Government.

End.