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News Extracts

7th Floor, Dublin 2
Telephone: 01 661 0366
Facsimile: 01 661 3401

No IRA

Miriam O'Callaghan:

I am going to move on to Northern Ireland. There is general concensus between all the parties on policies such as, you all support the framework document, the Downing Street Declaration, but it seems to be in the approach to Northern Ireland, as Taoiseach, that you differ and I am going to focus on that. Last Friday, Bertie Ahern you said that you saw your role as Taoiseach as primarily representing Nationalist Ireland, is that how you see it?

Bertie Ahern:

Well that comment is in this context. Tony Blair as a new Prime Minister has said that he supports the Union and would stand by the Union and he would see his role as playing a particular emphasis on protector of the Unionist people. I have no difficulty with that whatsoever but therefore I think we have to play a special role in looking after the Nationalist people, it is fifty, forty, ten now. It is fifty from the Unionist community, forty from the Nationalist community and ten that wish to be considered neither.

Miriam O'Callaghan:

So you do see yourself as representing Nationalists?

Bertie Ahern:

You have to represent that and that is primarily the role that you have to take, but it is not exclusively and you do it from a position of harmony and trust, to built trust with the other

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communities but the Nationalist communities feel that they have been alienated for a long time back, for decades back and they want to see that somebody who is Taoiseach here understands their special position and understands that we can represent their views strongly and authoritatively, not exclusively, they do not ask that. I have travelled all over Belfast and Derry and border counties and I have had this discussion but they do want somebody who can stand up to them, and I think Tony Blair is quite entitled as Prime Minister of Britain to stand up for the Unionists but we have to work together to find a solution of an inclusive society without pre-conditions, on the other side of the end of violence, which is the first thing that any of us have to do, I think it is very difficult to go anywhere until we see an end to violence, but I think that special position of the Nationalist people has to be represented and remembered by whoever is Taoiseach in this country.

Miriam O'Callaghan:

Do you feel on the same issue, Taoiseach, that you have let the Nationalist community down? On the same day you said you see your role as Taoiseach as one of being neutral and you don't want to front a Pan Nationalist Front.

John Bruton:

I didn't use the word neutral I think, what I believe very strongly and I disagree with Bertie Ahern very fundamentally on this. I believe the Unionists are Irish people and I believe the Irish Taoiseach, who ever he is, has to represent them and look after them as Irish people...

Miriam O'Callaghan:

Even if the British Prime Minister is representing the Unionists?

John Bruton:

I believe they are Irish people and I think anybody who believes in bringing the people of Ireland together has to believe that people in the Shankill Road are Irish, just as people on the Falls Road, it is not a question of religion, and I believe our

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job is to build a bridge between the two communities and I think the Irish Government has got to be seen to be fair to both sides. Now I know under the Anglo Irish Agreement we have a special responsibility for the Nationalists, which we do and that is right, and I have always stood up for the Nationalists when it had to be done, at Drumcree for example, I said things that were very tough to the British and I have had to say things in private that were even tougher still....

Bertie Ahern:

And rightly so.

John Bruton:

But, but, but, I can do that with conviction because I am seen in general to be willing to hear both sides and not just to be taking a partisan view, but I would have to say also that my big mission is to end violence in this country. I was elected to the Dail in 1969 and one of my closest personal friends, when I became a member of the Dail was a man from Monaghan, a Deputy with whom I shared an office, Billy Fox. Billy Fox was murdered by the IRA...

Miriam O'Callaghan:

Does that colour your judgement?

John Bruton:

It certainly does, yes, it does. I looked into the coffin in Navan of a young soldier who was shot by Republicans in the course of a kidnapping in Co. Leitrim, I can tell you there is one thing that I want to see and that is an end to this sort of intimidation and violence....

Bertie Ahern:

Everyone agrees with the end of violence Taoiseach, no one wants to see it.

John Bruton:

I want to see it ended and I also believe that it will not be

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ended by pretending that the threat doesn't exist. By pretending that the Republican movement isn't a threatening movement as long as the IRA and Sinn Fein are linked and the IRA hasn't given up the violence. There is no point being naive about this, we are dealing with an organisation that has been involved in ruthless killing over 25 years, that is trying to infiltrate to private areas in this State, as well as exploiting the drugs issue to their own political advantage. We have got to be very firm....

Bertie Ahern:

Who has spoken the toughest words against the IRA Taoiseach?

John Bruton:

I would like to just complete the sentence if I may, which is, I believe that there has got to be a very clear distinction between paramilitary politics and democratic politics, and no Taoiseach should have any doubt, any doubt, about whether he should meet Sinn Fein as long as the IRA are still in business.

Bertie Ahern:

There is no doubt on that matter, as far as I am concerned Miriam, the Irish Taoiseach has a special position and recognised by the British Government because they have that special position in Unionists and understood by the Unionists parties and the Unionists people of all traditions, but that does not stop the person, it is understanding the 40% Nationalists and trying to carry them to a new solution and I have worked on the issue of consent, our Party have moved our position on consent where we have told our Unionist friends that we cannot make any change again without their agreement and that one measure has given great confidence and given great stability to the Unionist community, and as far as I am concerned as Taoiseach of this country I would do every possible thing I could to build agreement, and bridges and co-operation and concensus and I think the structured solution that we can have to bringing Nationalists and Unionists together and it can be possible and of course those who are engaged in violence, there is no place for violence, there is no place for murder from anybody, from any quarter, and nobody in Dail Eireann

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of any persuasion has any track with people involved in violence and I have stated that as far as I am concerned as Taoiseach the only reason I will have anything to do with talking to Sinn Fein will be on the basis of moving them through official level, moving them away from violence. That is what we have to do and I believe that that is achievable, I think it is possible.

Miriam O'Callaghan:

So if you become Taoiseach after Friday will you allow Irish officials to continue speaking to the IRA despite the Polglass (pho) bomb that was found last night and the bomb that was found in the British Army base on Saturday. Will you still allow your officials speak to Sinn Fein?

Bertie Ahern:

I would if the issue, are they serious about moving away permanently and unequivocally from violence..

Miriam O'Callaghan:

That doesn't sound like they are though?

Bertie Ahern:

If it becomes clear that they are not then there is nothing to talk about, but I still believe and honestly believe and I know that the British Government do that there is a possibility, a possibility for a short time of achieving that and hopefully we are not going to see that all drift away, because it has taken us 28 years to get it this close and unfortunately for the last few years it has been drifting away further than it was at the end of 1994 but there is an opportunity and I think whatever happens on Friday that opportunity will last for a few months, if it goes any further than that I think we could be back into the bad days again.

Miriam O'Callaghan:

Do you think it is a fundamental problem for you Taoiseach that Sinn Fein don't really trust you, they much prefer the aspect of Fianna Fail/PD?

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John Bruton:

I don't trust them, I don't trust them until they will prove it that they really mean it and I think that it is right that one shouldn't trust people who have that record. On the other hand I know that people can change, most Republicans supported violence at some stage or other, but they have given it up completely, so people can change, people changed in 1927, other parties have changed completely and left it behind them, and I believe that Sinn Fein can do that too, but they have to change completely in their hearts, it is not a question of making some declaration on paper and saying, Ah well, we can always go back to violence if things don't go well, they have to actually make a strategic decision to throw away the crutch of violence, and say, we are going to walk the road, as democrats...

Bertie Ahern:

They must be assisted in that.

John Bruton:

They must be assisted in that and that is why....

Bertie Ahern:

Seventy years ago your party and my party worked in that, we have to carry out that role.

John Bruton:

Indeed and in order to assist them I was responsible for getting the talks in Belfast started. There were no talks available to Sinn Fein when the first ceasefire took place, on the 10th June last year, after a lot of hard pounding I got those talks started with John Major's agreement, ever since the Republican movement hasn't been able to make up their mind, the talks have started again this week, they are there for them, waiting to go in, all they have to do is sign up to the Mitchell Principles, give up for good violence. Violence is not Irish.

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Bertie Ahern:

I have urged them to do that for a long time Taoiseach, but unfortunatel as you know the understanding that the Republican movement had, and they were totally wrong to follow the track they did, but the understanding that they had was back in 1994 that they would be able to move into the talks process.....

John Bruton:

Why wasn't that clarified for them by the then Government?

Bertie Ahern:

Well you know it was clear to the negotiating teams...

John Bruton:

You raised that yourself in the Dail and it wasn't clarified.

Bertie Ahern:

I did, I did and it would have been helpful. A whole year while I was negotiating it Taoiseach and the British Government were negotiating it, they were the ones who went to Sinn Fein and negotiated with Martin McGuinness...

John Bruton:

I thought it was?

Bertie Ahern:

You thought it was who?

John Bruton:

I had the impression that it was all done by your Ministerial colleague, Mr. Reynolds, and if something wasn't clarified in 1994, he was Taoiseach by then....

Bertie Ahern:

He was Taoiseach but the British Government were in it and it was the British Government who were linking the talks....

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J.057 Page 7

John Bruton:

I don't think you can blame the British Government for a misunderstanding like that, if Sinn Fein were not told what was happening there were other people responsible...

Bertie Ahern:

The view was that as soon as three months would go past and the framework document would be presented that then without preconditions we would move into the talks and as you know what the British Government did, the British Government played the game, first of all, was it permanent and then the British Government played the old game, which you walked into, about the commissioning, Washington 3 and then we lost a year. Now the IRA were totally wrong to break the ceasefire, we lost a whole year on that.

John Bruton:

I never supported any precondition but I did say as a Leader of a democratic country that I wanted arms taken out commission and no respectable Leader would say otherwise.

No further reference to Northern Ireland.

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