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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH
BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

FOR: M BROWNE/EMBASSY, LONDON **FROM**: B NOLAN

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Comments by Tommy Cheevers, Pauline Gilmore, Michael McGimpsey on Apprentice Boys march and Eileen Bell, Alliance Party Chairwoman, 31 March 1997

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TOMMY CHEEVERS

Commentator: With the minimum of pomp, 17 Apprentice Boys from the Walker Club in Ballinafeigh began their marching season just before 10 o'clock. Ten minutes later they reached their first obstacle. A line of RUC landrovers blocked their path across the Ormeau Bridge but the club had already said they would avoid a repeat of last year's confrontation there and turned away along the Annadale Embankment without so much as a glance in the direction of the nationalist Lower Ormeau. It was an action which provoked fury from a handful of Loyalists waiting at the scene. The protesters were angry that the Apprentice Boys had not made some form of protest and the torrent of abuse continued as members boarded buses for the demonstration in Killalea. But Tommy Cheevers, a past Chairman of the organisation in Belfast was unmoved.

Cheevers: The majority of people in Northern Ireland realise the moves that we are making here and, at the end of the day, we are not prepared to bring confrontation on to our own streets; and if people can't be big enough to see that, then they've got an axe to grind politically and they're trying to manipulate us. Any people so far this morning that have abused us - and we're talking about 7 or 8 people, we know them and they are members of the DUP, so we'd ask that party to come out and condemn that sort of action.

Commentator: Are you surprised by what you saw today?

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Cheevers: Very pleased. The majority of people applauded us coming down the road. What we have done is, we have taken all the tension out of the air. From the start of this year, instead of entering into a new year full of hope, people have been just focussing on what will or will not happen over the parades issue and people do not want another situation like we had last July. We believe that we took the correct steps here, and what we will say is that we have proved who are not the tolerant people, well we'll prove that in the days to come, and it's up to them now to make the next move. It's not for people on one side of a bridge or another side of a bridge, to deny access to anyone, but the parades have to take place in a dignified manner. But there are always those in our society unfortunately who are just bigots, who can't see anything and they've only small lives to live.

PAULINE GILMORE

Commentator: Pauline Gilmore of the Loyalist organisation 'Ormeau Residents demand equal rights' supported the original Apprentice Boys decision but she too was unhappy.

Gilmore: People feel disgusted, they feel betrayed, they feel disappointed. They don't understand why there's no form of protest at all, that it's a matter of walking - they didn't even walk down to the bridge - they walked down and they re-routed themselves, now that is not a situation that we had expected. We had expected the Apprentice Boys to walk down to the bridge, they didn't do so. Everybody who is standing here from the Ormeau Road just feels the years and years of work that has gone into organising parades and keeping the community together, it's now starting to fall apart. We're also not happy that the Ballinafeigh Apprentice Boys Band which belongs and lives within this community, felt that they couldn't even represent them who walked down in front of them today.

Commentator: Why did they feel that?

Gilmore: Because they were so severely disappointed with just coming down and walking away from the bridge.

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MICHAEL MC GIMPSEY

Commentator: Ulster Unionist Councillor, Michael McGimpsey was also critical.

McGimpsey: I think what we saw solved nothing. Obviously it was a big improvement on what happened last year but I think this does not truly reflect the sort of feeling of anger that there is within the local community.

Commentator: Have you any problem with what the Apprentice Boys did this morning?

McGimpsey: I would not criticise anyone because I was not part of the decision-making process but I think perhaps it was unfortunate that they did not formally protest at the police lines before moving on.

Commentator: And of course quite a few people in the area have made those feelings clear as well.

McGimpsey: I think so and I think that is understandable. It appeared almost that they were accepting a re-routing and that is not my understanding of how this organisation or any other organisations feel - that this is being done under protest.

Commentator: The Orange Order in Ballinafeigh has already said the Apprentice Boys decision does not set a precedent. Its first parade in the area is planned for the end of April. Pauline Gilmore says her organisation will be holding what is being called a civil rights march there one the 10th of May.

EILEEN BELL

Commentator: Eileen Bell, in terms of the marching season first, changed times from last year?

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