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SECRETARY OF STATE SPEAKING ON BBC RADIO 4 – 2.12.99

INTERVIEWER

Mr Mandelson you will be relieved at the very least politician this morning?

MR MANDELSON

I am not just relieved, I am absolutely delighted. And I think that if we take in the full enormity of what's happened this week. You know for a generation politicians in Northern Ireland have been denied power, because they couldn't agree on how to exercise that power in a proper constitutional framework in which everyone's rights were assured. Now, what we are creating this week is an opportunity of a generation for people in which local people, with local accents now being put in charge, back in charge of local affairs and that is how it should be with the principal of consent very firmly established, no longer any second class citizens in Northern Ireland and I believe that is a tremendous basis for what I believe confidently will be a durable settlement.

INTERVIEWER

But there is still enormous distrust as you would expect and there is still big problems ahead, you would acknowledge that?

PETER MANDELSON

I do acknowledge that. I am not complacent about the difficulties ahead. But I think what the whole of the last 11 weeks have shown and brought home to everyone who is involved in this is just how much they need each other in order to make things work, in order to fulfil each others aspirations and meet everyone's goals. I believe we do have a strong deal in what is being created. I think that because every shade of opinion is now represented in Northern Ireland, because above all this deal has been negotiated by the parties themselves. It hasn't been sort of spatchcopped together by Government so that people's heads are then imposed on them and the people themselves, their will, their demand to make it work has been heard loud and clear and the thing that has overwhelmed me really this week is people's just earnest desire, an overwhelming desire to see it work and to see it last. And I think that will come home very very strongly on all those politicians who have a very very great responsibility indeed.

INTERVIEWER

12

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If it is going to collapse it will do so presumably over decommissioning which is the biggest problem that lies ahead. What sort of instructions is General John de Chastelain, who is in charge of the decommissioning process, what sort of instruction is he under from people like you, from the politicians? Because clearly the unionists will say, if there is no more than a gesture that is made, nothing more than a gesture, then we will refuse to carry on with this whole thing when we review the process in February.

PETER MANDELSON

Yes well I think the important thing to realise is that John de Chastelain and his Commission start from an important starting point which has been given a mandate which has been given to him by all the parties. All the pro-agreement parties now agree that decommissioning is an essential part of the process ....

INTERVIEWER

They have different ideas of how it is likely to work though don't they?

PETER MANDELSON

Well that is true. But they agree that it is a voluntary act. They agree that it should occur as soon as possible and they also agree that it is for the Commission itself to take the whole process forward. The Commission must meet with the representatives of the paramilitaries, to agree to discuss the modalities, how all this is going to be achieved and I believe that leaving it to the Commission is the right thing to do in discussion with the paramilitaries who can't set up a body like this and then start sort of cramping it and telling it what to do and constraining it with sort of deadlines and time tables. But nonetheless all the parties agree and certainly both Governments agree that decommissioning must mean the destruction of arms, or putting them permanently beyond use.

INTERVIEWER

All of them?

PETER MANDELSON

Yes and it must be verifiable by the de Chastelain Commission. Of course there should be no connotation of surrender, nobody is seeking to humiliate anyone but if you are asking me what I think is likely to be the outcome and what I hope for is in all probability the self destruction of arms by the paramilitaries but that must be verified by the Commission. There must be no doubt in people's minds

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that decommissioning has taken place because if that is not the case, if that isn't achieved, then the political settlement and the institutions we have created will find it very difficult to endure. The Good Friday Agreement is a replete, it is a robust and I think irreplaceable treaty and agreement. But it stands together, you know, you can't have one part of it going ahead and another forgotten. It stands or falls together and that is what everyone understands and is committed to.

INTERVIEWER

So in the event that all the weapons are not got rid of, one way or the other, would you then require, would the British Government and the Irish Government then require Sinn Fein to leave the Executive?

PETER MANDELSON

Well I have made it clear that whilst decommissioning, like the unionists and others going into devolved institutions, while these are voluntary acts, nonetheless the obligation on all the parties to make sure that each remit is fulfilled is very clear and that certainly goes for Sinn Fein, as far as the IRA's decommissioning is concerned. And I think all of us have a very strong moral obligation to make clear what our expectation is. We have done that, the British Government have done that, the Irish Government have done that, the American Government have done that. Everyone is making clear what is expected of the IRA and I believe and I am confident that that will be fulfilled. But if, if and I am not planning for failure, but obviously we make provisions for it, if there is default in the case of decommissioning just as would be the case if there were a default in relation to devolution too, I would have to step in, along with the Irish Government to suspend the operation of the institutions until that default was corrected.

INTERVIEWER

But then everybody would suffer for the misdeeds, if one can use that expression in this context, of one party to the process.

PETER MANDELSON

Well eventually they might not all suffer. But I would have to suspend the operation of the institutions very quickly indeed.....

INTERVIEWER

And the Executive?

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PE[redacted]R MANDELSON

The entire lot of institutions, the North/South the whole caboodle would be suspended and we have made that clear, the Irish Government has made that clear because we cannot allow any party that is in default of their obligations to profit from that. Now you are right in saying that in the first instance everyone might suffer from that, I don't want to punish everyone, but it is necessary to make clear right from the outset what everyone's obligations are. We would then go immediately into a period of further review and to see what and how and how quickly we could put the process and the institutions back together again in order to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement as a whole was put back on track and that is what I would do.

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DOORSTEP WITH DAVID TRIMBLE AND SEAMUS MALLON FOLLOWING EXECUTIVE MEETING – 2.12.99

DAVID TRIMBLE

Well, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. As you know we have just had the first meeting of the Northern Ireland Executive. We regret very much the fact that two Ministers chose to absent themselves from that meeting. But, of course, as you will have known from notice from the press conference that they gave, that they themselves are happy to accept Office and to endeavour to discharge their responsibilities. With regard to the meeting, I can tell you that the meeting was very constructive and we had a very good discussion, in which we looked at a number of issues. Amongst the things we considered, was the question of the expenditure programme for next year, the programme for Government, the legislative programme and, of course, the arrangements for the inaugural meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, which we expect to be held on 13th December and the inaugural meeting of the British/Irish Council, which we expect to be held on 17th December. This was not a meeting for decision taking. We are all new to the job. We have all a considerable range of matters to look at and to consider and so we were in effect, as a group, reading our way into the situation. We suffered from the absence of the contributions which could have been given by Mr Robinson or Mr Dodds. I think that's unfortunate and we hope that situation will resolve itself before long. But, as I say, it was a good meeting and we look forward to the same friendly, co-operative spirit prevailing at future meetings too, when, no doubt, there will be difficult decisions to take on which we may disagree.

SEAMUS MALLON

Well there was quite a considerable amount of work done at, what was, let me describe it as a momentous meeting. It was the first meeting of this entire new dispensation, the first meeting of this Executive. I have to say it was very pleasing. The nature of the personal relationships there, the way in which all Ministers were very, very well briefed in terms of their own departments and their own departments' requirements and there was no doubt about those requirements. We made arrangements for next week and for the setting up of the further institutions. We have decided that we'll meet again next Tuesday for further deliberations. But it was a good workmanlike meeting. I again, like the First Minister, regret the absence of two of the Ministers who will be playing a key role in this. I hope that in coming weeks, they will be with us to assume the type of responsibility that we all have, both as individuals, and as an Executive, in dealing with the matters that affect everyone. It has been a very, very important day, politically, for all of us, and if we can continue anywhere near on the same basis as we started today, it augurs well for the future.

DAVID TRIMBLE

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I should add to that, I just want to add to that that, of course, the meeting was co-chaired by Seamus and myself. Now, if you will forgive me, and I hope Eamon that you will forgive me in this respect, Seamus has an urgent appointment and we just managed to conclude the meeting in time to enable him to keep it and so I'm not going to take questions on this. We'll just leave things like this.

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