

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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PRIME MINISTER, TAOISEACH, FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER – 17.12.99

TONY BLAIR

We have had two very good inaugural meetings this morning of the Council of the Isles and British Irish Council and of the Intergovernmental Conference too and at this morning's meeting we decided in the British/Irish Council that we would focus on 5 issues, in particular for the build up to the next summit which will be in 6 months time, in the Republic of Ireland and those issues are issues such as drugs, social exclusion, transport, the environment and the issue of e-commerce in the *** economy which is obviously a very important part of the development of all our economies. And it was an extra-ordinary event. It was a coming together of people who have much in common, much history and I think we have found both the meeting itself and the discussion that we had both useful and I think a very good pointer to the future and we have just been through obviously some of the other issues that concern us mutually in relation to the inter-governmental conference as well. So I think it has been a very good start, as I have said earlier this morning and I won't repeat what I said but I think it is important to see all these different parts of the Good Friday Agreement falling into place. We know that there is still a long way to go. We know that there will still be many difficulties and obstacles along the way. But I think we have come further in these last few momentous weeks than we could possibly have thought that we could achieve, even a short time ago. So there is some cause for confidence and some cause for optimism. But we remain absolutely determined to get there and achieve the rest of it.

BERTIE AHERN

Well as I say from the Irish Government's point of view we are very pleased that two meetings have taken place this morning, the British/Irish Council is now up and functioning. It is an important institutional part of the Good Friday Agreement and for that I think it's arrangements of structures and the area for promoting things I think is going to be extremely important and useful. There were 20 items listed for discussion but I think there could be 120, there is so many areas where we can make progress. As the Prime Minister said 5 of those we agreed this morning as priorities that we will immediately on a central basis start working on so that in 6 months time when we meet in Dublin for the British/Irish Council meeting, we will have progressed those issues and I certainly believe in this and the Tainiste and my ministerial colleagues believe here from the Irish Government that we will make these issues that work and we will make them function. They are real genuine issues that can help to make a difference for people and that is what we are about. The inter-governmental conference meeting we see great progress in this, not only in the context of talking about bilateral issues

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in relation to Northern Ireland but also about many other issues. Most of the agenda items are what we discuss in the European context even not always in the European context are issues where our positions are never too far apart and usually are far nearer than most other countries so it make immanent sense for us to co-operate on these issues and I look forward to doing that and I suppose most importantly today brings to conclusion the setting up of the institutional arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement and for that we are grateful to everybody involved and I look forward to the other side of the new Millennium of now making them operate and work from our point of view, from the ones that we are involved with in the Irish Government and I look forward to giving our full energy and effort and innovation to making it successful.

MEDIA

Prime Minister and Taoiseach, there has been so much achieved, so much put into place as you say but there is still this problem about decommissioning. What do you say to the paramilitaries looking into the New Year?

TONY BLAIR

The issue of decommissioning is being dealt with by the Independent Body on decommissioning and the Agreement, the whole of the Agreement has got to be implemented. I think that is the best and simplest thing to say. And I believe that people have come so far now and seen what co-operation and partnerships can bring that I am sure that everyone will be working towards making sure that the Agreement, in its entirety is implemented and that we deliver that peace that people want to see.

BERTIE AHERN

Maybe just to be short about, because I think we have probably talked enough about the item. I think that they should assist us in decommissioning, the word decommissioning, get rid of it.

MEDIA

I wanted to ask you Prime Minister about the statement made by the SofS this morning in relation to the Patten Commission he said that he hasn't finalised his views yet. Have you discussed that with the Taoiseach and have you given any indication to the Irish Government as to what precisely you will be implementing?

TONY BLAIR

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Well obviously we still are under that process of concentration and I think probably we should wait until the appropriate time to make any announcement and decisions on that and of course you know these are issues that we are all concerned in and we want to do the best for people and I think the best in this instance is to wait until the proper time to make the comments.

MEDIA

Shouldn't fishing be one of your areas for priority action given the effect that quotas is going to have on both your industries?

TONY BLAIR

We were actually talking about this very issue this morning, because obviously we understand the concerns of many fishing communities. Fishing communities in Ireland, fishing communities in Britain that will be effected by this. There is a real problem which is the fact that the fishing stocks have been run down so low we have to deal with this problem but we recognise that the fall out for fishing communities are serious and this of course is one of the area in which the British and Irish Governments should be working together in order to try to guarantee the security and prosperity of those communities that are going to be affected by this decision.

BERTIE AHERN

You know as it happens and if we hadn't got these institutions we wouldn't be here discussing them. On the North/South basis Michael Woods our Minister for Marine and Brid Rodgers, the Minister from the Executive are working together in the European Council this week for the first time ever, that is progress and I think they are given the cases in the interests of our fishermen of course taking account of the conservation and environment issues. And today here on the Northern Ireland aspect of the Intergovernmental Conference we all of us were selectively discussing it and I think that is the way forward for us to deal with issues like this which are very important to our fishermen and our fishing industry.

MEDIA

You talk about the closeness of the relationship between yourself and the Prime Minister and also between the two countries. Some time ago you sought to open up a debate on the Republic of Ireland and the Commonwealth. Is that the next step along perhaps?

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BERTIE AHERN

Would you wait until we get this one to work properly.

MEDIA

Last week the Taioseach said that the security situation in the North must begin to be viewed in a different light given the recent developments and do you think that the time is now right for confidence-building measures in that area?

TONY BLAIR

Well of course we are always looking for ways to normalise the situation because that is what people wish to see and that has got to be done consistent with the security advice but the very reason we have hoped that this can come about is that the security situation changes obviously if we get the agreement implemented and underway and the confidence and hope is there and there is no one that wants to have the situation normalised sooner or further than I do. Because that is in the interests of all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

MEDIA

You shook hands for the first time in public with a Sinn Fein representative how much of a milestone is that for you?

TONY BLAIR

I think I said at an earlier occasion when I think I had the first meeting with Sinn Fein that I think part of this whole process is that we start to treat each other like normal human beings in a normal society. And Bairbre de Brun is a Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive. I think it would be strange if I was not able to shake hands with her in public, I have shaken hands with her before in private it seems to me you know it is maybe a measure of how many things have to be got over to make this situation one that is normal for people, that it should be thought as an event in itself and I just hope in time as the memory of all the bitterness and destruction of the past starts to fade or at least reduce in its intensity that we can all recognise that we are all people now struggling to do our best for the future of Northern Ireland and I will always be wanting to greet people who I believe are trying to make democracy and peace work in a way that I would greet anyone. And if that is a milestone well so be it.

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MEDIA

(Unclear) British/Irish Council could may be work on?

BERTIE AHERN

It is one of the items listed. It is an area for us to discuss in the British/Irish Council and I look forward to it being an area where we will discuss that and of course there is many, many issues and no easy solution, there might be no solutions but there are items we can discuss.

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