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New Years Resolutions?
BRITISH AIRWAYS

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The full transcript of Liam Clarke's interview with taoiseach Bertie Ahern

Q: At the moment, without decommissioning, would Sinn Fein be an acceptable partner in government if the need arose for you to have another partner?

A: That is so hypothetical it is meaningless. In our view we have to try to deal with the situation as it is. The situation as it is that within a matter of weeks we have to try to find some means of making sure that Sinn Fein are partners in the executive; that is what the challenge now is. What might happen in the dim distant future is fairly irrelevant. Our view is that decommissioning in one form or another has to happen. I am on record in recent weeks and months as saying that it is not compatible with being a part of a government - I mean part of an executive - that there is not at least a commencement of decommissioning, and that would apply in the North, it would apply in the South. That is what we need to achieve.

The great task now is to see if we can construct under John de Chastelain some method of where we get through this. The big challenge is decommissioning vs the executive, but it is my view and the view of all those who are working with me that we are not going to get David Trimble to agree to the establishment of an executive or the formulation of the executive until we actually deal with the decommissioning issue in some form, even if that is in some fairly minor way.

Q: So you are really saying: "Regardless of what it says in the agreement, the practical politics are that there can be no executive without a start to decommissioning".

A: Yes, I mean that is the practical politics because, while the agreement doesn't say that decommissioning is a precondition it certainly isn't a precondition and there is no doubt about that. [But] there are no timescales [meaning start times] put in for everything else either. There is no timescale put in for the human rights legislation, there is no timescale for the policing commission report, there is no timescale for the prison releases, there is no timescale for the demilitarisation generally of army bases. So therefore it is illogical and unfair and unreasonable to argue that there should be a timescale for decommissioning, and it is even more illogical to argue that [this] is effectively April 9, 2000.

No power-sharing before arms handover, Ahern tells Sinn Fein

Running out of patience with the IRA

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You can't prioritise and bring forward and incrementally do everything and then say we won't even start on the first 0.001% cent of this issue.

I think that is all we are saying. Nobody is saying that 50% of the armaments have to be given up, or 60% of the armaments. We are not saying anything other than the agreement states that we have an international commission of decommissioning, that de Chastelain should, because he is experienced at these matters, and those others with him, [be able] to construct some mechanism that gives credibility to whatever they construct, to allow everybody, not just the Unionists, to see that what is in the agreement is meaningful. That is what it is. Indeed that is the context it should be put in, not in the narrow context of Trimble says: "I can't move to the executive" it is the wider context of everybody's view that decommissioning would be part of the agreement and would incrementally move on under a construction under de Chastelain.

Q: To be absolutely clear, when you say decommissioning you mean a start to the destruction of weapons and a commitment to continue. That needs to be made before you can get [an executive] going?

A: Yeah. People say "does that mean physical, does that mean Semtex, does that mean guns?" It means that the principle has to be accepted and that then whatever modalities are worked by de Chastelain, because that is [his] expertise to work out how it actually happens, and that is what we mean.

Q: It doesn't have to be given in to the RUC?

A: No, no.

Q: They could be burnt in a field, whatever?

A: Whatever they work out within the international commission.

Q: On the question of Jerry McCabe, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams have said repeatedly that these people will be released early as part of the Good Friday agreement. A glance at the agreement suggests that they will too, and behind what Sinn Fein says there seems to be the suggestion that they would be included.

A: I have answered this in the dail during the week. There were no assurances given at any time on the McCabe murders. It was raised a few times, not many but a few times, and it was categorically ruled out by both me, by the minister and by officials on the occasions when it was raised and there is no doubt about that whatsoever.

Q: Under the terms of the agreement the crime was committed before the set date. It would seem on the face

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of it that they would qualify

A: Well, we from the very start said that we were excluding them because they hadn't been charged by April 10, and we said if people were subsequently charged at trial and found guilty they would serve their sentence. We made that absolutely clear. What Sinn Fein did ask for, and press for, was that the other people who murdered members of the Garda Siochana, the lifers, the 40 years, that they would be released under the terms of the agreement. And we did say we would accommodate that and we did.

Q: Because these people [McCabe's killers] didn't make themselves amenable before the date?

A: Precisely.

Q: They can take the consequences.

A: And our legal interpretation and my understanding is that if it were challenged we would win.

Q: Will the agreement be parked over the summer if there is no decommissioning and it is not possible to transfer powers?

A: Every stage in this agreement has been difficult to pursue, and I suppose my view on April 10 was that we had made a major achievement in signing the agreement, but we were going to have a major task in implementing the agreement and every bit along the way has been difficult, but we have been achieving it. We have been getting there, we have a lot of demilitarisation going on, we have a lot of prisoners released, we have the human rights legislation - we just published . . . it here yesterday. We have the implementation bodies now being drafted, we have the North-South bodies being drafted, we have the British-Irish Council very clear where we are going. We have the areas of co-operation clear.

So we have made an enormous amount of progress over the past 10 or 11 months and, of course, we still have difficulties. We have difficulties over decommissioning, we have difficulties that the executive isn't set up, we have the difficulties of Garvaghy Road, so we just have to keep at it. We can't allow ourselves to get pessimistic or allow ourselves to say 'we are blocked, we are in a corner, we are in an alleyway, we are in a cul-de-sac, we can't get out.' We just have to keep on exploring ways of doing it, and that has been the way it has been in peace processes throughout the world over the years and we are in the same position. We just have to keep on being innovative and imaginative and trying to find resolutions. I have to tell you that there have been a good few days in the past year where I said: 'God, there is no way out of this', but you just have to keep on at it, constructing, talking, dialogue, try this, try that, try the

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other.

It is hard, there is no good saying it is not. Every bit of it has been hard. I mean to get to the situation where Gerry Adams, in early September, said the war is over, done gone forever was hard. To get Martin McGuinness to take up the position of being the international person on decommissioning, that was hard. To get the implementation bodies, to get the areas, every bit of it has been hard. To get the policing commission set up, you remember all the rows about who was on it, every bit of it has been tough but we are ultimately getting there and we just have to keep on at that.

Q: I appreciate that you are not going to let up on your efforts or run out of breath, but if it wasn't resolved by May...

A: I think things would get very difficult. There is no doubt about that. If we run into late April and we have got nowhere and we are into the marching season it is extremely and extraordinarily difficult to get any progress during those months of May, June, July and August, there is no doubt about that. So we just have to try. I really hope that that doesn't happen because impasses and blockages and stalling create their own sense of insecurity and tension. I was up last week, I had extensive meetings and travels last week with the people in Newry and Armagh and Mourne council, I met all kinds of people from the churches to the communities to the politicians, the councillors and MPs and everyone else. There is that sense that we are in a corner and can we not get out and we are going to have further delays.

But there is one thing clear from everyone I met, of all persuasions, denominations and everything else - they all want us to get on, sometimes simplistically believing that we can move apace when we can't but we all want to get on. There is nobody saying 'throw it there, give up, go back to square', nobody is saying that.

Q: There is a problem with Northern Ireland politicians: they have been so long in opposition that they expect governments or Clinton or somebody to come in and cut the knot for them.

A: I think there is a pressure on Tony Blair and myself all the time to try to keep coming up with new ideas and new initiatives and keep on moving. We have had in the last few weeks, I think, probably more extensive dialogue with all sides. I have met the Unionists, I have met David Trimble. I have met with the SDLP on a number of occasions. I have met John Hume, Seamus Mallon, SDLP delegations. My colleagues have met UUP delegations. I have met Gerry Adams myself, I have separately met Martin McGuinness on, I think, two occasions. I have met the Women's Coalition, I have met the Alliance, not to mention an enormous range of business groups, community groups, religious groups, all

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the time trying to press.

We haven't made much progress since Christmas but it hasn't stopped us. The prison release programme; that has continued. The human rights bill; we have moved that on. The road show of the policing commission is being completed and they are moving on. We are working extraordinarily hard to get the North-South bodies and implementation bodies set up. So we are just going to keep at it, but we could well do with a break Liam, we could well do with a break on getting some formula, some mechanism, some understanding, under de Chastelain of moving things on. We could badly do with that at this stage. We just have to keep on trying.

Q: Are you having any meetings in the near future with the [British] prime minister?

A: We have contact all the time. After the 15th we have to have a look at what more we can do, but I will be meeting him on the 26th on the margins of the European meeting, so that is about a fortnight. If we haven't met by then, which I wouldn't rule out, we will be talking to each other before then. We will be certainly meeting and discussing where we are at that stage - I think that once the 15th is over we will do that. I do hope to meet the SDLP and Sinn Fein again early after the 15th. I do hope to do that. I am in regular, regular touch with both Seamus Mallon and John Hume and David Trimble whenever necessary, so we will step up activity on the other side of the 15th.

Q: Have you struck up much of a personal relationship with Tony Blair?

A: Yes. I'd have to say that Tony Blair and myself speak regularly, sometimes very regularly. Sometimes it would be several times a week or as necessary and then we exchange openly and frankly the good news and the bad news and we try to work as closely as we can together and we try to construct whatever mechanism and whatever way forward together, so there is very close working relationship both between the two of us and between Mo Mowlam [the Northern Ireland secretary] and David Andrews [the Irish foreign minister] and between our respective senior officials.

Q: How much more growth do you think there is left in the Irish economy? Do you think we are coming into a period of slowdown now?

A: Well, I suppose, looking around the country there is an awful lot of economic activity still going [on]. I think we are at a stage where most of the multinational companies are doing well, a lot of them are investing still, reinvesting. Last year 27% of the investment from the United States into the whole of Europe came into Ireland. There is no reason to think that that is in decline. On top of that an enormous amount of our own

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indigenous companies, that would be linked in not only to the technology sector but into other sectors as well, are developing.

The employment growth across all sectors is still very good with the exception of agriculture, which is in decline, continually in decline and has been now for 20 years, but that continues - but all other sectors are going really well. Property and construction and everything related to that, and there is a huge amount related to that because in the whole property area it goes right into the domestic market, and the spending power of individuals, because people are doing well. There are an enormous amount of people working, there is a max of 7% unemployment in the country and a lot of people who are working full time are also doing part- time jobs and a lot of students are doing part-time jobs so in terms of wealth generated it is moving on apace.

I am involved actively in the Agenda 2000 discussions and all is going well this year. We will probably get up to 88% to 89% of the wealth, European GDP ratio, this year so I mean we are moving on apace all the time.

Q: No sense of slowdown?

A: No, and one of the things that we hope to do over the next number of weeks is to implement a policy around the country of what is called integrated area plans, and that will give a boost to rural towns and towns around the country to go ahead and start new programmes and new projects around the country and I think that is going to be a big help.

Q: Do you have any sense when Britain will go into the euro zone?

A: Well, from our perspective we certainly want them to do that. We would like them to do that, I think it would remove for us the only area of instability that we would see, not now but somewhere in the future. It is their business, needless to say, but I think from all the vibes you hear from the financial City, from London and from all the quarters, and what you hear politically and what I think I know Tony Blair would like to do - they will do it, but they are unlikely to do it until after the election, which will probably be 2001. So I think we are talking about 2002 and, you know, that is a bit away.

In the meantime it is no great secret to know that the financial houses in London are doing a lot of their euro business through Ireland, and that doesn't disappoint us, needless to say. It is a new form of business and I suppose in terms of a news story, now, we planned a lot of things for the euro but we didn't realise there would be that extent of that business. The Dublin financial city I think it is fair to say has gained considerably from that kind of business and that kind of interest that we didn't quite think would be there prior to the euro.

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Q: People relocating?

A: No, not relocating, using the existing locations. Needless to say it gives existing locations in the financial services centre and the Irish banking centre and the financial sector generally more activity, and it gives our central bank more activity. The flows of money through Dublin. I don't have the figures because they are a matter for the central bank and they don't release these things except in their report, but it is quite clear that Dublin is growing apace because of this. You are probably aware that most of the financial houses here are all recruiting staff. I am not saying it is not all directly related to that but it is all helping to give our financial city more activity.

We will shortly be bringing out a policy paper about the future of the International Financial Services Centre here, and our future strategy. We have just completed that paper and we see a lot of confidence in Dublin in terms of the financial city which we only started 10 years ago. It is growing in strength and is going to go into the 21st century in a strong position, and this strategy worked out with the sectors will be very significant.

Q: It gives you a big shout for American banking and everyone else who wants to get into Europe.

A: I don't have the figures but I am sure we can get them for you but it is very impressive in terms of a story, the number of new licences which came into the financial services centre here last year and not only the new ones that came in but the existing ones that have extended and increased their operations. That is not just euro-related but it is helping our whole financial city. Of course, as you know, when your financial city is going well that helps the ancillary services, all of the accounting ones and the sister organisations in the legal world that are using them.

At the start a lot of the legal services here were not being used, people were using the ones in their own country, but now they are using the legal services here. So all of those businesses are moving ahead apace and I think when the figures come out in the autumn for 1998 it will show that the economy has grown effectively close to 10% during 1998. The official figures are about 8% but when you see the figures come in the autumn I think it will be very close to 10%. Employment: we will have created 90,000 jobs during last year. Most of these jobs are sustainable, as modern jobs are, and an enormous amount of the labour market growth has been in very productive services to the economy; manufacturing services, financial, insurance. I mentioned earlier on to you that 27% of the investment from America was in here, but 1998 also has shown that in the technology exporting industry we were second only to the United

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States and that is a considerable achievement for a fairly small patch. Trying to keep it there is the problem (laughs).

Q: Is the question of joining the Commonwealth moving forward in any way?

A: We opened it up for debate for this purpose. It was raised by northern politicians with me in the first instance and it got some audience, some, in the South and some within my own party. People have spoken out within my own party in favour of it, even up to ministerial level and we said, rather than just saying the traditional 'no, under no circumstances' that we should at least facilitate the debate and our people to participate in the debate. This weekend one of my ministerial colleagues is sharing a platform. In most of the universities around the country the debate is going on this winter.

I don't think anything will happen in the short term on it, but former president Mary Robinson, now the UN high commissioner, has made favourable comments about this in the past and Nelson Mandela has. The head of the Commonwealth organisation who was here some time ago has stated that they would love to see Ireland part of it, but I think they are all mindful of the fact that this is something that won't happen overnight but I think we have to let the debate go on.

The traditional thing is that people said 'Is it just a British kind of orientated organisation?'. I think people mightn't have the same old animosities to that even if it was, but I still think it would create some difficulties, but in the broader sense the fact is that a huge proportion of the countries that make it up are republics, so it is seen in a different light. But it is going to be an ongoing debate, there is not going to be a quick conclusion.

Q: If public opinion was firmly behind it would you personally be in favour of it?

A: Personally I don't have a great hang-up about it. We take a traditional view that de Valera wasn't in agreement with it in the first place but I would have to say at this stage there would not be a groundswell of support for it but neither would there be enormous antagonism. We are at a stage now where people have to discuss it, know the facts about it, know the statistics about it, know its make up, see the benefits, see the connections, look at the disadvantages. That is a debate which has really just started since Christmas. I am anxious to see that debate take place because the perception of it was of an organisation that everybody said 'we would be totally against that' without knowing much about it. I would be quite happy if 1999 reaches a position where people factually know about it and then we will see where it goes after that.

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Q: Ireland does seem to do very well in any international body that it participates in.

A: I think we are a small country and the reality is when you are 3.8m, or if you have 5m on the island, now in the euro zone there is 270m people, the extended Europe is going to be 450m, you have to be trying to use your voice in international groups like the UN, where we are now seeking actively to be elected on to the non-permanent position on the Security Council for 2001, 2002.

We are looking at our involvement in Partnership for Peace. That is another debate which I think will probably come to a conclusion this year, I think that's the one that is getting preference at this stage. That's also ongoing.

We are also very involved in the International Labour Organisation and we are involved in some of the UN health organisations as well. For a small country it is good to have a platform where you can put your case and involve yourself actively in cases. In the Council of Europe we play a very active part as well, so it gives a good base for organisations. And we use them as a means of communicating, a means of dialogue and selling the message for this country. We would never have the resources to have embassies or missions everywhere in the world, so I think you can use these organisations as a way of meeting people and engaging with them.

Q: The other big symbolic thing that is talked about is a visit by the Queen. Do you have any sense of when?

A: That is best left for consideration on the other side of the full implementation of the Good Friday agreement. I think to speculate on it this side of that is not helpful. If we can implement the agreement, if all went well, that wouldn't take an awful long time. I think we really do need to have the agreement bedded down and the various institutional structures set up and then we can give consideration to that. In the meantime, a number of members of the royal family are fairly regularly coming here and are welcome here and it is not creating any great problems.

Q: Earlier I omitted to ask you if you have any indication that decommissioning will happen?

A: I haven't, no, and I suppose the stated public positions are no different than the private positions of what Martin McGuinness has been saying. He hasn't said anything to me privately that is different to what he has been saying publicly. Though I am an optimist in these things, because if you didn't you would have never got the Good Friday in the first place. We wouldn't have got Sinn Fein in September 1997 in to the all-party talks, the multi-party talks, at that stage. So I think we have taken every step as we go. This is another problem, and while

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we see that it is fundamentally important to deal with this problem, we are not stopping on all of the other issues, we are pressing on ahead.

This week at cabinet we were discussing the human rights commission bill, which we got through and have put it to the committees in the dail. All my colleagues here are dramatically, I think, and effectively, working to try to get the implementation bodies and the legislation for that up and running. We are also working on the Nationality and Citizenship Amendment Act, so we are sparing no energy in trying to keep things going.

Things are difficult, I don't want to be giving you a wrong slant, Liam. I am concerned with progress, and concerned about how we are going to get this one, but I don't see it in terms of panic or crisis. I think you have to calmly try to work your way around this. I mean people said to me back in January of 1998 when we put Gary McMichael and Davy Adams out of the talks that that had made it impossible. A few weeks later when the talks had moved to Dublin, we were putting Sinn Fein out of the talks, people said that would be impossible. Then when we went to America for St Patrick's Day, they said we had no resolution by then, so that was impossible, and still we moved it on to April. And then when we got to Garvaghy Road and all the difficulties of the summer and Omagh and the Quinn children, they said we would never get out the other side of that. But we came back in September, we at least participated in the assistance of having Sinn Fein saying what they said about the war was over, Martin McGuinness moving in to the talks, Trimble and Adams meeting, then painfully getting ourselves to the October deadline, going past the October deadline, getting to the areas of co-operation and implementation bodies, and moving on.

So I think all the time it is a painful process but we just keep going at it. It is vitally important that somebody like me does not allow the team involved, whether it be the Americans or the British government, to say: 'Oh God, we ran out of space'. I think we just have to create that space.

Q: You have nothing up your sleeve?

A: No, no. I would have to say no, we do not. But as you recall, when Tony Blair went over to the meeting in Belfast, just before, I think about December 10, and the agreement, when he went back, unravelled, it seemed as if we had no chance of getting to Christmas.

I sent my entire team up to stay in the North, they all ended up with flu. I sent the whole lot of them up to stay in the North till Christmas week, a few days before Christmas, so that we would get there. It is that kind of a thing, you just have to keep at it, and we know that we have to inject energy and inject commitment. Though I would say this Liam: we cannot do it on our own, we

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can only try to find ways and means and look at imaginative and creative thinking. We cannot do that on our own; and we do need the parties who are committed, by the vote of the people and their own signatories and their own support for the Good Friday agreement, to help in its implementation and I think they have to do that.

We can't construct things and the British government can't construct things out of the air. It needs the co-operation of people to do that and I hope that people imaginatively use that co- operation over the next few weeks.

Q: Have you any indication that the IRA may have been involved in or sanctioned the recent murder of Eamon Collins?

A: We have, because of this brutal murder of him and all that happened around it, I have been asking, but we have no information whatsoever about his execution. I have very strongly condemned it, I think it was a brutal deed. Who precisely was involved, but we just have no information. I suppose people have their suspicions about it, but nothing has been given to me of a hard nature.

Q: If a murder were pinned on an organisation that was a party to the Good Friday agreement, if somebody was killed in a punishment attack for instance, should there be suspension of releases for that organisation's prisoners?

A: Well it's a matter for the secretary of state. I think what we have been trying to do, and I think the British government, have been trying to do, we have been doing our utmost not to allow events on the fringes to knock the whole policy off ground, but I think that's only tolerable for a period.

If there was hard evidence of any kind of a consistent and prolonged nature then I think it would be very hard to do that, particularly if that kind of evidence was shown that it wasn't sporadic or that it wasn't isolated. I mean if there were premeditated decisions by the leadership of paramilitaries to engage in what was clear breaches of the Mitchell principles, which is what we have been working to for the last four years or so, I think governments and policing forces couldn't ignore that.

Q: Sir Ronnie Flanagan has said that the leadership of all paramilitaries on ceasefire are sanctioning punishment attacks.

A: We have noted that with concern and I think obviously the RUC are trying to do their utmost. I also have to say we were very pleased that the Sinn Fein members in the assembly and the Sinn Fein member in the dail and Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams have

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very strongly in recent weeks, stronger than they have ever ever done before, denounced publicly all forms of punishment beatings and I think it has been long said that punishment beating is not only degrading for those people who suffer it, it is degrading for those who perpetrate it.

Q: You say the Dalkey robbery isn't the IRA?

A: Our information on that one all along has been that it hasn't, it was to fringe republican groups, that has been our continual information on that one.

Q: There has been a lot of speculation that if in May if the agreement isn't fully implemented then articles 2 & 3 may come back into play, but I understand that isn't the case

A: No, we can extend the period. We don't have any problem this year. It might become a problem in the future but we don't have a problem in the short term. There is provision to extend that out for a period and that is what we would clearly do, we wouldn't do anything precipitate.

Q: Are there any areas I haven't touched on that you wish to raise?

A: The overriding point that I would like to make, Liam, is that, not for the first time, we are in a difficult position, so we shouldn't play that up in to being an enormous thing. But I think it is very important that the overall prize in this, the achievement for the first time in literally hundreds of years, not just this generation, but for the first time in hundreds of years, of getting an overall resolution to the problems of this island in total and that is the three forms of it: the assembly in the North, the executive, which is effectively the government ruling the day-to-day issues, the North-South bodies in their role in working on the implementation bodies, the North-South bodies and the North-South ministerial body, working, and the new relationship of the British-Irish Council, both between the governments and between the politicians of Edinburgh, Cardiff, London, Belfast and Dublin. They are enormous achievements, enormously beneficial to making democratic politics sustainable into the 21st century for the betterment of everybody on this island and to bring normality to the situation. People should reflect on what we can achieve by using them to the full, and we should not, and nobody should, let that prize slip away from us. People should consider whether short-term progress and doing things in short term is not well worth it in the context of what we can achieve overall. People should not allow it to drift into a dangerous situation. We are not in a dangerous situation, but people should not allow it to drift. I really think that is the central point I want to make. We will play our part, but I think everybody else has to too.

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