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IRISH TIMES INTERVIEW WITH SPEAKER TOM FOLEY

Summary

1. Foley non-committal about special envoy idea and sceptical about the MacBride principles. Calls for increased support for IFI from Irish Americans.

Detail

2. The Irish Times of 11 March carries an interview by the paper's Washington correspondent with Speaker Tom Foley (faxed to copy addressees). Asked about the proposal for a US special envoy to Northern Ireland, Foley said the idea had to be judged against what advances it could make in the discussions taking place between the constitutional parties. The White House had said that, if an envoy was helpful and constructive, the President would consider it: this was the right answer. "If it is disruptive and damaging to the talks I would doubt either the Irish Government or the British Government will find very much to commend that, nor would I like to see any action on our part as a country to set the talks back or to disrupt them". He pointed out that he had not been approached by the President or indeed anyone else in authority in the US to undertake the job: he had no plans to return to Ireland at the moment on a fact finding mission, nor did he know if the President would ask him in the future.

3. Foley said he thought the President should look again at his commitment to the MacBride principles. He posed two questions: did the MacBride principles encourage employment in the North and did they assist in encouraging an end to discrimination against the minority community. They had to do both: "it doesn't do a great deal of good to have less discrimination with dramatically fewer jobs, because everyone loses". The principles were actually counterproductive. "US firms might be put off the idea of investing in Northern Ireland by a fear being caught in a cross-fire between the MacBride principles on the one hand and the statutory law of the area on the other". Few business leaders were so committed to the end of discrimination in the North that they would risk legal liability and their company's economic future. He said that people should consider whether the MacBride principles in fact discouraged employment, reduced jobs and reduced opportunities for the minority as well as for the majority.

4. Foley expressed disappointment at the level of support for the International Fund for Ireland from Irish Americans. He said there was an element in the Irish American community that had been wholly negative about the fund for reasons that, he thought, were suspect. "Elements of Sinn Fein have tried to influence Irish opinion in this country and have been critical of the fund". They had an influence disproportionate to their numbers. He found it frustrating that he had to twist arms in the House of Representatives to obtain 20 million dollars for a programme. In general, he said, the Irish American community had been ineffective in doing things for Ireland: "we have probably one of the largest of all ethnic groups, allegedly 40 million, very poorly organised and organised often for purposes that are inimical to the interests of the minority community as well as to Irish men and women generally".

5. Foley's outspoken and sensible comments should help stiffen Irish spines over the proposal for a peace envoy/fact finding mission.

THE QUESTION OF PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGE WAS ALSO RAISED WITH JONAS... TOLD THE TRIBUNAL THAT IF HIS... TO ACTUAL... SOURCES RELATING TO ALLEGATIONS... IT WOULD DESTROY THE... PUBLIC AND FOR EVERY... AT THE END OF THE WEEK, THE... HAVE A RIGHT AND A DUTY TO... INFORMATION IN THE... FROM THE INFORMATION...

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