

**MARTIN McGUINNESS, EDUCATION MINISTER. EVENING EXTRA. 4**

**SEPTEMBER 2001**

MARTIN McGUINNESS

It is absolutely vital that this protest should end. It is absolutely vital that we bring it to an end and that we recognise that people with a key responsibility in helping to bring it to an end are political leaders of all descriptions. And I think political leaders have to raise their voices in defence of these innocent schoolchildren and their right to be educated free from intimidation. Whatever the wider concerns, it's wrong to draw schoolchildren into the issue and the protests should end and politicians, who have a key role to play, should play their part fully in bringing it to an end as quickly as possible. That said, young children have a basic right to travel to school without fear and to be educated in a safe environment, that is paramount. Now if there are other difficulties and problems, then we, as political leaders, have a responsibility to address those but those difficulties and problems cannot be held up as an excuse for this intolerable behaviour at the Ardoyne Road outside the Holy Cross School.

INTERVIEWER

Would you be concerned Minister that this situation could spread, that we could see disputes surround other children going to school in other parts of Belfast, in other towns, in other cities.

MARTIN McGUINNESS

Well I certainly hope that that will not be the case and I would be very, very surprised if other communities believed or recognised that this would be a productive way forward. I think we are dealing with this one particular situation at Holy Cross. The difficulties that are created there are not just affecting the Catholic children who go to that school, but also affecting the children from the Glenbryn Estate who go to Wheatfield Primary School, and I am as concerned about their education as I am about the children at Holy Cross. In fact I think that it is important to pay tribute to the teachers and school authorities involved in trying to sort this out and particularly the principals of both Holy Cross and Wheatfield schools for their efforts in dealing with the situation.

INTERVIEWER

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There will be many within the loyalist and unionist family who will say that those are very fine words from the Education Minister, but they will say the reality on the ground is that this situation is being manipulated by members of Sinn Féin, and whether you like it or not, that is their perception and as thirty years of history in Northern Ireland have told us, perception is all.

MARTIN McGUINNESS

Well I don't accept that that is the case but if that is their perception then it is a perception that we have to deal with, and I think the only way to deal with that perception is to ensure that political leaders and community leaders engage in meaningful dialogue and discussions about the way forward. I think that republicans are more than willing along with the community to address the problems and difficulties that exist in that part of North Belfast and in fact have been to the forefront of calling for meaningful dialogue in the course of recent weeks and I do think that's important. I would be absolutely horrified and disgusted if republicans were involved in manipulating the situation and in fact I know that that is not the case.

INTERVIEWER

Even though people like Billy Hutchinson has said quite clearly that they have seen leading members of the republican community taunting loyalists yesterday and again today?

MARTIN McGUINNESS

Well, I mean, if Billy Hutchinson's saying that, I wasn't there so I don't know what was said in relation to what people were shouting at one another. I certainly do know that it is not in the interests of republicanism, certainly not in the interest of Sinn Féin and indeed, in my view, not in the interest of our entire community for this activity to be continuing. So what we need to do is rather than shouting at one another, if that is the case, we need to get together, we need to get into a room and we need to sort this out as a matter of urgency.