



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Interview with the Tánaiste

QUESTION

1. Three years on after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - what is your analysis of the Accord as it now stands - and regarding the pace of development and progress so far?

ANSWER

The Agreement is firmly in place and the Conference and its associated Secretariat have functioned effectively, including at times of stress in Anglo-Irish relations. The Conference has, in fact, met more frequently this year than at any period since the Agreement was signed and we have also succeeded in significantly broadening its usual work agenda.

There have been a number of positive developments over the past three years, including improved policing of the marching season, an end to Supergrass trials, the beginning of an economic package for West Belfast, the preparation of new and, we hope, effective legislation on fair employment.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that we are satisfied with the scope and pace of change. Much more needs to be done. One area of particular concern, for example, is harassment of the nationalist community. We are also pressing for further reforms in the administration of justice. There is a broad economic and social agenda which urgently needs to be addressed.

QUESTION

2. When the Agreement was signed at Hillsborough one of the aims was to put Nationalists on an equal footing with that of members of the Unionist community. To what extent has this aim been achieved?

ANSWER

Stormont lasted for over fifty years; the Agreement has been in existence for only three. It is not easy to reverse decades of systematic discrimination. There has undoubtedly, as I have said, been some progress and reform in certain areas but we are now anxious that the review process should bring a new sense of urgency to our work. We want to see real political progress achieved as quickly as possible.

QUESTION

3. Unionists were told that the Agreement offered a way forward towards the restoration of normal life without violence or fear. Unionists suggest that the opposite has happened. They point out that the Agreement has been in place during a period of much violence and that in fact the Accord has driven people and communities further apart. What are your views on this issue?

ANSWER

The continued violence of the past three years has profoundly saddened us; we have repeatedly expressed our unreserved condemnation of acts of violence. Our absolute commitment to the defeat of terrorism is expressed in deeds as well as words.

It is important, however, that we do not fall into the error of believing that a security programme aimed at the suppression of terrorism can be a substitute for a policy which addresses the root causes of the problems of Northern Ireland. If violence is to be eradicated from Northern Ireland, those fundamental problems have to be addressed. Both governments are seeking to do that, but the effort needs to be enhanced and meaningful results achieved.

QUESTION

4. Has the Conference been working satisfactorily? There have, after all, been rocky periods with the background of high levels of violence, the Stalker/Sampson affair, the Birmingham

Six appeal, Gibraltar and the release of Private Thain. And for example will there be further difficulties over extradition.

ANSWER

The Conference provides a forum in which these issues are fully discussed. The rocky period to which you refer would have been even more difficult to manage had the Conference not existed. No doubt other difficult issues will arise in the future, and the full use of the consultation mechanisms provided for in the Agreement will be essential. Extradition, with safeguards, is of course in place. In addition, we are also considering with the British Government the use of the Criminal Law Jurisdiction Act in appropriate cases.

QUESTION

5. Which key areas will the Irish Government be concentrating on during the review period?

ANSWER

As is indicated in the Joint Statement following the Intergovernmental Conference on 2 November, the review of the workings of the Conference will be thorough and serious. We will address all the relevant areas, including political, security, legal and economic and social issues. Our particular concentration will be on drawing up a positive programme for future action with a view to broadening and deepening the work of the Conference. I would personally like, for instance, to see the Conference addressing the implications for both parts of the island of the completion of the Single European Act in 1992.

QUESTION

6. Both governments have signalled that they are anxious to facilitate movements in the North towards a political settlement but yet the situation remains deadlocked. What are your hopes for the future in terms of political dialogue?

ANSWER

I am not sure that 'deadlocked' is the right word. Progress in such a delicate and complex area will obviously not be achieved overnight. Our hopes are for the widest possible dialogue. Logic, realism and common sense all point towards the need for such a dialogue. We hope it will take place sooner rather than later.

QUESTION

7. Has the question of political movement in terms of devolution been a matter for consideration at Conference level by both governments?

ANSWER

Devolution is dealt with in Article 4 of the Agreement. That Article speaks of devolution "on a basis which would secure widespread acceptance throughout the community". Sub-paragraph (c) of that same Article goes on to say that "both Governments recognise that devolution can be achieved only with the co-operation of constitutional representatives within Northern Ireland of both traditions there". On the basis of the stated positions of the parties in Northern Ireland, I do not see that the prospects for this are very high at present.

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