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Transcript of interview between David O'Connell
and Mary Holland on London Weekend Television
on 17.11.1974.

Mary Holland:

Incident of violence, what someone in Northern Ireland dubbed, and its several years ago now, as the politics of the last atrocity takes over. And most people in Northern Ireland do believe that whoever is actually doing the killings, the root cause of them is the campaign of violence being waged by the Provisional IRA. If the IRA called off its campaign, the argument goes, then the sectarian killings in retaliation to that campaign would also stop. But what do the IRA want to make them stop? Will they be influenced to shift their position by, in the face of these mounting toll of sectarian killings? To try and find out the answer to these very pressing questions, I talked on Friday night to a man who very rarely talks in public. To David O'Connell, the Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA.

David O'Connell - Chief of Staff, Provisional IRA.

We ask the British Government to make a simple statement of fact, that they are going to disengage from our country, that they no longer have any designs to perpetuate a rule, a colonial rule which has existed for a hundred years. We ask of the British Government to simply state that they have no interest. If they do that, we are in a different situation.

Mary Holland:

If they do make that declaration Mr. O'Connell, the suggestion is, and I think it's probably right, that it would provoke a massive Protestant reaction and that we would have a sectarian war, and a sectarian war which is very much of your making. Because, if I could just take one thing that has happened this,

in the last couple of weeks: you get two Protestants killed in Derry and its said that they're killed because they were working for the British Army, and then you get the classic situation - you get a Catholic killed. And what that looks like to both sides is that Protestants get killed because they're Protestants, but the IRA, who were the first people in that situation. And then Catholic gets killed because he's a Catholic, in retaliation. And however much you talk about warnings and legitimate targets, to Protestants in the North it looks as if the IRA is waging war on Protestants. It's always looked like that.

David O'Connell:

No. They were not killed because they were Protestants. They were two people who were working for the intelligence section of the UDR. They were arrested in Creggan, they were taken into custody, they were questioned and after a very full examination, it was proved conclusively that they were engaged in spying and as such they suffered the penalty. Furthermore we reject outright this charge that we shoot people because they are Protestants. If I may take a case, er, which, one which resulted in a great deal of criticism on ourselves, namely the execution of two judges. One of those was a Catholic. It was immaterial to us what religion the man practised.

Mary Holland:

These two men to whom you refer, Judge Conahan and Martin McBirney, were both in fact known for their rather liberal attitudes towards political offenders. How, to people in the North it just seems that when you start shooting people like that there is no defence against anything, that, that their whole system of law is going to break down. I mean how can you justify that?'

David O'Connell:

It's clear cut case. They were part and parcel of the corrupt British system in the North. We made approaches privately and publicly to both of these people to get out of this system, but they did not. We had a tremendous furore from politicians, from churchleaders, from North and South, from Britain. It was hypocritical in the extreme. It came back to a - it reminded one of the execution of Sir Henry Wilson, who was shot dead in 1922. It brought a furore because he sat in the seat of the mighty. But if young - if we take a case. There were two Catholics gunned down last Saturday in a garage in Belfast. The four year old daughter witnessed the execution of her father. An attempt was made by the sectarian killers to get that child as well. Did one politician speak out? Did one Bishop open his mouth? No. But they screamed when two judges - and this is where we see in the present struggle the great divide between those who sit in the privileged position of power, and a forgotten people. It is the people who have suffered.

Mary Holland:

Mr. O'Connell, innocent people have died because of IRA actions, a lot of innocent people: and to a lot of Protestants in particular it looked as though they died just because they are Protestants. Now, can I ask you a very personal question. How do you feel when you hear about innocent people dying as a result of an IRA action.

David O'Connell:

The deaths of anybody - be it a soldier, be it an IRA volunteer - it hits one. Real human beings, the thing we cherish above all is life. We live for the day when we can live normal lives, when everybody can live normal lives. We are not unaffected by death. We know what death is. We have suffered it,

our own families, our own people have suffered it.

Mary Holland:

Well, if I could go on with this theme, I'd like to come over to the British campaign which you've claimed for the first time just recently. You said repeatedly that you've no quarrel with British people - two children died in a bombing, in a bombing attack which you have since claimed, the M62 bombing. Do you see that to British people that looks like a campaign on ordinary British people. That have - for example, when you, when you attack a 'pub without a warning in which soldiers drink, but civilians also drink in it, the barmen drink in it who have no involvement in anything.

David O'Connell:

Perhaps the British public feels like that. It's may be understandable from their viewpoint. The facts are that the coach that was struck on that particular journey was a military coach. The intelligence available to the unit which carried out that operation indicated that there would not be civilians. Perhaps you would check back and see how many civilians were on it - but that was the intelligence available. It was a military target and clear cut target. Furthermore, over 12 months ago the IRA stated that they would strike at British military personnel when and wherever they deemed necessary.

Mary Holland:

Even if it means.....

David O'Connell:

The war

Mary Holland:

.....:killing children. Even if it means killing civilians.

David O'Connell:

They warned civilians not to frequent places where military personnel are known to have established haunts. It is basic.

David O'Connell:

We have er, brought that point home in a six county situation - it is now registering in England. There is no

Mary Holland:

Railway stations?

David O'Connell:

We strike at economic, military, political and judicial targets. I'm afraid

Mary Holland:

So you're saying that the only things you've done have been those targets?

David O'Connell:

Those in that classification, those are the targets.

Mary Holland:

And are you saying you haven't done the others?

David O'Connell:

Such as? like, which others?

Mary Holland:

Railway stations? Euston station?

David O'Connell:

Railway stations we have.....

Mary Holland:

Harrow School?

David O'Connell:

...we have, we have struck at military and economic..er, the economic one will bring in the field of communications.

Mary Holland:

Will bring in railways stations?

David O'Connell:

It will bring in, yes, railway stations. It will. There were warnings given out

Mary Holland:

Pretty wide range doesn't it.

David O'Connell:

It is a wide range

Mary Holland:

I mean, economic covers almost any

David O'Connell:

If I may make this point - we went to great pains to arrange a system with the British police to make sure that civilians were not injured. That the British police would know which ones were legit. legitimate and were not. And what do we find. The British police turn round and use that code against ourselves. Now, one can accept that if

Mary Holland:

How?

David O'Connell:

....There is, they publicly made the code known. They, they it was publicised, it was utilised, it was completely destroyed. As regards military targets - there are no warnings, there will be no warnings. Because let me make this point. For five years the British Government has had it's forces waging a campaign of terror - not just on the IRA, but on the people of Ireland. For five years. Kitson's theory of learning on the people, of squeezing the people has been done in the North of Ireland. What have we got from the British public, what have we got from the British people? Total indifference. They have washing their hands. We said last week in a statement that the British Government and the British people must realise that because of the terrible wage in Ireland, they will suffer the consequences.

Mary Holland:

Will you escalate that campaign?

David O'Connell:

We will.

Mary Holland:

And how will you escalate it? Would you take in political assassinations for example?

David O'Connell:

We have clearly stated - military, judicial, political and economic targets are within our brief at this point of time. We have refrained from doing that, for two years we've had a saturation, we've had a constant terror born in our people. We are going to resist that now. The responsibility rests clearly and squarely with the British Government. As I said earlier on, that whole situation can be changed

overnight by the British Government simply saying: we are not going to stay in Ireland. We are going to disengage from Ireland. They hold a key to peace or war.

Mary Holland:

Well, that's David O'Connell had to say in reply to some of the questions we posed at the beginning about the IRA's views on why they are continuing their campaign of violence. Not only in Northern Ireland itself, but now in the rest of Britain as well. And those views of course, are shared by the people who do the bombing and to judge by what Mr. O'Connell says it doesn't seem that either either he or they are likely to be easily deterred.

In the second part of the interview, I asked him greater detail about the IRA's terms for calling off the campaign. But first we take a break.

Mary Holland:

Welcome back. Well in the first part of our interview with him, David O'Connell said that the object of the IRA's campaign of violence is, of course, to get the British Government to pull out of Northern Ireland and as we saw on this programme last week, there's evidence that if the IRA campaign does escalate in this country the British Government will be under increasing pressure to pull out. What's stopping them is the fear that any talk at all of withdrawing let alone actually doing it, will provoke a reaction from the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland and could lead to civil war. And there are also signs that the Provisional IRA recognise this. On several occasions recently IRA spokesman have said that they don't want what they call a Congo situation in Northern Ireland but the time scale of any British withdrawal is negotiable.

David O'Connell - Chief of Staff, Provisional IRA:

We have stated that the timetable, perhaps it will be two years, perhaps it will be less, it may be more, but such a time scale is negotiable with the British Government. We made our point very clear to Mr. Whitelaw, what is not negotiable is the principle of declaration of intent. We do not seek that simply out of you know, historical animosity. We seek it solely and purely on the grounds of realism. We believe that that is the vital key. You say to me that the British people, the British Government wished they could get out. We say, why do they not say so?

Mary Holland:

Because they fear, Mr. O'Connell that there will be a Protestant backlash of immense proportions which will mean that the words massacre have been used, that the killing of a great many Catholics. Now what is your answer to that?

David O'Connell:

Our answer is that such a belief is totally felatious. That it is, there is no foundation for it. We accept that there will be a continuation to sectarian war which has waged for the last three years. Like let's bear in mind over 260 people have died as a result of sectarian killings. When people talk about the war that is going to come, they conveniently forget about the war that has been waged. They do accept that there will be a continuation. We also know that the Republican Army would be in a far stronger position to provide a defence against such killers once the British Government have said we are leaving, once they pull their troops back, eh to barracks because again we go by facts.

Mary Holland:

By the Republican Army you mean the IRA, yet you're talking as though a civil war is going to happen. Do you want that civil war, would it benefit you in the long run?

David O'Connell:

Certainly not. But we are not unrealistic. We've got to provide for a civil war situation. Our chief objective is to provide a defence for the nationalist people of the North. At the moment it is an impossible task to ever fail to agree. For a simple fact is that British forces provide a free access for sectarian killers.

Mary Holland:

Mr. O'Connell is what you're saying that if the British army withdraws you're prepared to slug it out with Protestants for possession of Northern Ireland.

David O'Connell:

Its not a question of that at all.

Mary Halland:

What is it a question of then?

David O'Connell:

Its a question of if the British army do as we ask them to do, our top priority is to ensure that any sectarian enemies that come to slaughter Catholics do not succeed. We have no doubt in our capacity to provide protection. Secondly let's put this in its proper prospective. While the British Government are making this declaration we are entering a new situation, a new phase.

Mary Holland:

Let's talk about that.

David O'Connell:

We are opening up an entirely new situation. We have stated for so many years now that we seek dialogue negotiation with all shades of Irish We believe that the Irish people can come forward with your institutions of Government, with your police force, with the normal requirements which organised society requires for its own well-being. We believe that the Irish people can do that and we also hold that a chief obstacle at the moment and I'm going to come back repeatedly to it, is the presence of an army that is hostile to the very idea of the Irish nation coming to its own as a free developing nation.

Mary Holland:

If the British were to declare their intention of withdrawing could you make common cause with Protestants for an independent Ulster?

David O'Connell:

Well we have had no clear definition as to what you know, you term Protestants mean by independent Ulster. We have sketched out.

Mary Holland:

I mean something which has nothing to do with the South which they don't like.

David O'Connell:

Well I don't blame them for having nothing to do with the South. We do, we are not very enamoured by the South - if we are speaking about the Southern establishment because our objective is to see that establishment go by the board. We believe in a new Ireland. The creation of, you know, new institutions of government for the whole Ireland.

Mary Holland:

Would you be prepared to have an independent Ulster as a stepping stone on the way to that Ireland?

David O'Connell:

If we talk about an independent Ulster. If you mean by Ulster, Six Counties, we say no. The Six Counties is not an official entity it has the inbuilt sectarianism. It was designed for that purpose and to perpetuate any form of Government upon that area is to court disaster.

Mary Holland:

In the short term, Mr. O'Connell, the British Government has said that the decisions must be left to Irishmen and their first step towards that as they see it is the elections to a constituent assembly in the North. Will you stand for those elections to get a voice in that talking shop (interrupted).

David O'Connell:

We have made no definite decision because no date has been announced for the Convention election. The very terms of the Convention have not been made only there was talk of a Green Paper coming out. But if I may come back again to this thing. The British Government sees everything in this Six County context when it comes to military and political policy but they view Ireland as in the 32 county context with economics. Now the British Government must change from this artificial statelet which they created at a point blackmail. If they had advocated it, if convention assembly for the whole of Ireland that's a different kettle of fish.

Mary Holland:

Would you talk at a convention assembly in the short term to solve the immediate problems of the North?

David O'Connell:

Well as I said, we have no definite decision of what we will personally participate or not participate in the er Convention elections.

Mary Holland:

Could I press you. What would you actually want. You want a declaration of intent?

David O'Connell:

We want a declaration of intent from the British Government which is a simple statement of fact that they are disengaging from Ireland. The outline, the planned programme of withdrawal. Secondly they open the jails. They release all the prisoners, political prisoners in England, in Scotland, in Ireland. The jails are opened. And thirdly that they will put no impediments in the way of all sectors of the Irish people, all the different spheres of the Irish political spectrum coming together to determine what form of Government should obtain and decide.

Mary Holland:

All of these three demands obviously present difficulties but at the very least it's possible that if something could be worked out in the future which would satisfy all the people of Ireland as Mr. O'Connell says, then the British Government would be only too glad to concede the first two demands and withdraw gracefully and finally from the Irish scene. The problem of course is there is no political solution even remotely in sight which does satisfy all the people of Ireland, North and South, Catholic and Protestant. I asked Mr. O'Connell about the practical difficulties of setting up an All Ireland Conference of the sort he suggests. And how will people qualify for this assembly, would they be elected, would they be summoned, who would get to it?

David O'Connell:

Well what we have said is that you know the three best points is declaration, general amnesty and an all Irish Conference.

We've asked that the British Government will put no

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impediments in the way of such a Conference. But we believe that the mechanics for forming such, a calling for such a Conference have to be worked out. We believe that we run for us as for any other body at this stage to state this is how it should be done. We believe that there is a period of dialogue negotiation through which one must go and um we have you know, no doubt that soon the mechanics would be devised. You may reach agreement through your own initial dialogue and so forth. It is a fact that we have had talks with who wouldn't have entertained any talks with us say 12 months ago. We had talks with UVF(?) We've had talks at a political level, some of our political people speaking to UDA political people. There are some people we prefer not to mention but we've had, it's no empty claim and it's not a boast it's a statement of fact as we have had dialogue right across the board. Such is progress. Now in the new climate and there would definitely be a new climate once the British say they are going or we can if necessary expertise as regards form and the way to progress and so forth. But the important point is this. Is the desire on all parts for a Conference which is genuine open ended, any scheme as regards what the Government of Ireland should be is thrashed out. Having such anwe believe is necessary and we would hope that from, you know, be it loyalist, nationalist call them what you like, that they will have the same approach. We believe that such is the situation is feasible in a climate of post declaration.

Mary Holland:

And if it's boycotted by people who want no part of a United Ireland or no part of an all-Ireland Conference, what do you do then?

David O'Connell:

Well, if the significant section boycotts such a situation,

admittedly it makes the task harder but one has to realise ok we have a problem, how do we overcome it. At this point of time I couldn't say how we could overcome it but the will would be there to overcome it. Again I come back to the precedent of Algeria. This was the great fear of Algeria that the coloners would, you know, opt out. Many of them did opt out which was a great tragedy but the major section of the French/Algerian people remained behind and it is a fact that today they are playing a positive productive role in free Algeria. We believe the same situation will obtain and at least we are more positive than the of doomsday who preach doomsday. They talk about it so much they will nearly create it.

Mary Holland:

And if it does happen, if doomsday does happen, what then. If the Irish Government can't cope with the situation, want help if the border is sealed off, if you get a war of those proportions what then?

David O'Connell

Well sealing off the border like, you know,..... for the last five years and have not been very successful. If we talk about a doomsday situation I take it that you mean if a loyalist army began to massacre catholics what would be the situation. Number one the IRA is a well organised well equipped disciplined force. Number two, the people of the South, and the people of the South will create an army that will not permit the slaughter of Catholics on a massive scale.

Mary Holland:

So you'd have civil war in the South as well if necessary?

David O'Connell:

Well I don't know if you'd have it in the South. What I'm saying is that the Irish people right across the line will not stand idly by irrespective of what the politicians would say.

In such a situation the first casualties would be the politicians. The likes of the Cosgraves, the Lynch's, the O'Brien's who'd be shown up for what they are. Totally devoid of anything constructive. The people will assert themselves. They did in 1969. Nothing, and you may if you wish reflect back on an article written by a Freestate Army Commandant who laid out that situation. He stated quite clearly and he was realistic that the people of the South would not stand by and from our viewpoint.

Mary Holland:

And that the Irish army would not stand by?

David O'Connell:

Significant sections of the Irish army would not stand by, no, irrespective of what orders came from the politicians.

Mary Holland:

When do you actually think that this violence in the North is going to stop, not when do you hope its going to stop, when do you think its going to stop?

David O'Connell:

It is extremely difficult to make an actual prediction at this point in time. For a simple fact there is nothing whatsoever from London to give one the basis to make a prediction. We've had no intimations, good, bad or indifferent from the British Government. All we've had is the continuation of the Tory campaign by the forces against the people. Perhaps that may change. Mr. Wilson is in now. He has a majority. Perhaps he has been given the solving of the situation consideration.

Mary Holland:

You've talked to Mr. Wilson. Would you talk again to Mr. Wilson?

David O'Connell:

We have no qualms whatsoever in speaking with anybody which is a factor in this situation. We would speak to Mr. Wilson if we felt that the negotiations were going to lead on to a peaceful situation.

Mary Holland:

Would you take part in a conference set up by Mr. Wilson and his Government?

David O'Connell:

No. We would not take part in a conference. If you are speaking on the terms of an all-Irish conference or even a Six County conference, eh, a vital element, for a conference to be a success is that the British Government stands aside. In fact, in the Convention proposals they have already accepted that.

Mary Holland:

But you'd negotiate a truce with them?

David O'Connell:

We will negotiate on the withdrawal of the British troops from Ireland. Plain and simple.

Mary Holland:

With the British Government?

David O'Connell:

With the British Government. Yes.

Mary Holland:

Thank you Mr. O'Connell. David O'Connell of the Provisional IRA talking last Friday. The thing that struck me most in these past few weeks is the difference in the debate which is going on in Britain and in Ireland itself. In Britain the discussions about Northern Ireland are still political about White Papers and elections and possible solutions. In Ireland you hear very little of that now. Even in Dublin, even at Government level the debate is increasingly about the logistics of sectarian war. About who's going to defend whom and the strength of each side in force of arms. People in the North seem to have gone beyond politics as though gripped by a dreadful sense of inevitability. Mr. O'Connell says that he looks to the British Government and in a way the irony of that interview is that the Chief of Staff at the IRA was

almost the only person I talked to in Ireland last week who apparently believes that the British Government still has the capacity to influence dramatically the drift to war in Northern Ireland.