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Extract from interview with Taoiseach on RTE

Sunday lunch-time news, 12 April 1981

Interviewer

Taoiseach

I don't see it that way at all. I just see it as something that has to be done, has to be faced up to has to be tackled. As I said last night, it's part of our overall strategy. It is not a question of giving Northern Ireland as a political problem, priority over economic development. I see the two as closely related, interacting on each other in fact, but apart from that, I believe that a nation which doesn't tackle a major outstanding problem like we have in the North of Ireland, then that nation impairs its ability to deal with all its other problems, but as well as that, on purely humanitarian grounds, the tragedy of Northern Ireland, has gone on too long, it's causing too much hardship and suffering, and it has to be tackled straightforwardly and honestly, with a view to providing some solution.

Int.

On the subject of Anglo-Irish talks you assured the Ard Fheis last night that no discussion has taken place with any other country or group of countries about changing our policy of neutrality, could I ask you do you see such discussion taking place at a future stage especially since you say we are not politically or ideologically neutral?

Taoiseach

There are two separate things there, first of all there is the question of military alliances, and being part of some military bloc. We are not, and have no intention of being, joining any military alliance. There is the other side of the coin, which is political neutrality - how we stand in the world in regard to the great issues of peace and human rights and all these matters of world significance and importance and things which relate to the preservation of world peace. On that side we are not neutral, we are very much committed to the western parliamentary democracy ideal, we are very much part of the European Community, we are anxious to play a full part with our European partners in making a contribution to defending these principles around the world, to working for disarmament and preservation of peace, working against ^{the} oppression and the exploitation of people anywhere in the world.

Int.

Since its now apparently common ground between Mrs. Thatcher and yourself and Mr. Lenihan that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is not a matter for the present bilateral studies, when will its constitutional position be discussed between the two Governments?

Taoiseach

What the studies deal with was fully set out in the communiqué and I repeated that again last night. They deal with the totality of relations between these islands and they also deal with the possibility of creating new institutional structures which would help to promote peace and understanding between the two peoples. That's what these studies are about, that's the process which we are engaged upon. When the studies have been completed at official ^{level} the result of those studies will be brought forward for examination and discussion and decision

between myself and the British Prime Minister and our two Governments and that's the next step in the process, and that's as far as we visualise going for the present.

Int. And when will the constitutional position be discussed?

Taoiseach. Well, as far as I am concerned the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is a matter of continuing interest in so far as we have always said, and we make no secret of this that our aim is to bring about the unity of Ireland, and of course that has implications for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, but I also emphasise that we want to achieve the unity of Ireland in peace and harmony and by agreement, and I think that's the matter that is of importance and significance to all the people in Northern Ireland.

Int. When you say though, by agreement, does that in effect mean that the Unionists, the Loyalists have a permanent veto, or is their consent qualified in some way?

Taoiseach. I don't like to think in terms of veto or anything of that sort. I believe that this is a situation which should evolve where we should have free and frank discussion with the people concerned, that the two Governments should see how the present tragic situation can be brought to an end and what new arrangements can be brought forward to solve the situation and in those new arrangements, naturally, the agreement of all the parties concerned would be necessary. It would be necessary to have full involvement of the political leaders from both Communities in Northern Ireland involved in those arrangements.

Int. But do you see any signs of change on the part of the Loyalists, are they becoming any less intransigent?

Taoiseach. Well, you have to think, there.. distinguish between the leaders and what some leaders say and what is actually happening on the ground with public opinion, in Northern Ireland. I believe that there is very considerable movement forward in the thinking in Northern Ireland. I think that right across the spectrum in Northern Ireland at the moment the present economic recession, the present economic desolation which has happened in Northern Ireland, this is causing very great concern and is causing a lot of people to rethink the situation and to see whether in some new arrangement a better economic development regime could be possible. By the way I might just mention there very careful note of the fact that when Ray MacSharry in Brussels negotiated this special package for Irish farmers - now this is a package which is not available to any other farmers in the Community, it's a special package for the Irish farmers, that that package was extended to cover farmers in Northern Ireland, I think that's an indicator of the way things might go in the future, and I think it has enormously impressed, certainly the farming community in Northern Ireland.

Int. Do you think the Unionists are likely to be made even more intransigent following the result of the Fermanagh/South Tyrone by-election?

iseach

No. I hope that the result of that by-election would not be misread or misinterpreted by anybody. I think it's just a manifestation of the two different traditions and their two different positions. I believe that in Fermanagh/South Tyrone anybody that goes forward anti-Unionist, any anti-Unionist candidate that goes forward will get the Nationalists vote. It's as simple as that - that's the tradition, that didn't begin today or yesterday. Winston Churchill himself spoke about the integrity of the quarrel, showing how far back the entrenched positions in those two counties go, and I am certain that the vote in the by-election was not a vote for violence. I think it would be a dreadful and tragic mistake for anybody to read it as such.

Int. Were you surprised at the result of the by-election?

Taoiseach No. I wasn't surprised at all. As I say I know that area very well. I know the feelings which are there. I know the two traditions which exist - the electoral situation which has prevailed over so many years, so many decades, it's part of the entrenched situation which we have to try and deal with.

Int. Are you pleased with the outcome?

Taoiseach It's not a question of pleasure or displeasure. Its a question of just accepting the ballot box. After all we are all democrats and we seek to have the rule of law and the parliamentary democratic regime accepted, and we ask people to abide by the political process and the ballot box so we have to accept that that is the result of that by-election and we have to deal with it as such.

Int. Sile de Valera one of your Deputies gave a newspaper interview before the by-election in which she seemed to be urging people to vote for Mr. Sands, would that have been your view as well?

Taoiseach No. I didn't naturally take any view on that by-election. That was a matter for the people of Fermanagh/South Tyrone to give their own decision on. I believe that they were affected by two things, first of all by the old traditional stance and attitude of opposing any Unionist candidate, that the Nationalist vote will go to anybody who opposes the union and unionism, but I believe also that on this occasion there was very likely a strong feeling on humanitarian grounds among the electorate that they would like to see something done to resolve the H-block situation. I am sure that was part of the result and the outcome.

Int. Bernadette McAlliskey said on this programme 3 weeks ago that the resolution of the H-block's crisis rested in your hands, now with Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers saying that they are prepared to die, is there anything that you can, or will do to prevent their deaths?

Taoiseach I have always made it clear that anything that this Government can possibly do to bring about a solution to the H-block situation, we will do. We are ready at all times to take any action, any initiative that is open to us to resolve that pretty tragic situation, and that is our position.

Do you think the British have mishandled the present situation?

Taoiseach

That's something on which I wouldn't wish to comment. I believe that, I have always said that the solution to the H-block situation can be found within the prison regulations and within the administration of the prison itself and that is still my view.

Int.

Would you agree with Sile de Valera with that if there are deaths that it will be the responsibility - those deaths will be the responsibility of Mrs. Thatcher and the British Government?

Taoiseach

No. I wouldn't say that at all. No. I think that... matters, emotional statements of that sort do not help. I think from our position in this part of the island should be that we are ready and willing to take any measures open to us to bring about a resolution of the situation to try and solve the problem on humanitarian grounds and it's along those lines that our action should be directed and not attempting to blame or condemn anybody in this situation. It is a tragic situation, a situation full of great human suffering, and these are the things which should be uppermost in our minds, to see if there is any way within the administration, within the prison administration, and within the rules that the situation can be alleviated and a settlement achieved.

Int.

Since the Northern majority have been told that their traditions and loyalties could be retained in some new constitutional arrangement, just what kind of united Ireland do you actually envisage, would it be a federal Ireland with two parliaments, separate laws north and south or a parliament with a Unionist blocking vote in an all Ireland context?

Taoiseach

The only thing I could say about that is that we have a very open mind as to the arrangements which might be brought forward. These are things which a variety of different approaches can be propounded. At the moment, our efforts are concentrated on the process which was initiated at the Dublin Summit on the studies, the results of the studies and the action arising therefrom. It's much too early to be attempting to propound any sort of final ultimate solutions at this stage. The only thing I say about it is, that we are open in our approach, very flexible in regard to arrangements and very willing and able to put forward any guarantees that may be required.

Int.

Do you think it is going to come soon?

Taoiseach

Well, I can only refer you to what I said last night.

Int.

You said that next year we might see more clearly?

Taoiseach

We might see more clearly the lines along which a possible solution might evolve.