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Irish-American Community meeting with the Taoiseach
at the Consulate on May 9, 1985

(Extract from the transcript of the meeting.)

Jack Thornton, Irish Echo

What does the Irish Government want Irish-Americans to do about? (a) the MacBride principles and (b) the appointment of a "Special U.S. Envoy" on Northern Ireland?

Taoiseach:

(Well I don't recall ever saying anything about the McBride Principles since I have come to North America. The issue, as far as I can remember hasn't come up. I remember one person raised it just in passing - as a point - but I had no time to give any considered response on it). The thinking behind the principles is something that I would have no difficulty in supporting. The placing of legitimate pressure on firms which discriminate in employment to end that discrimination is obviously desirable. There is a

proposal - there is, in fact, a decision - by the New York City Comptroller dealing with this very point which may, I think, have beneficial effects in regard to it.

We are naturally concerned, however, with a somewhat different point and that is the suggestion that there should be disinvestment in Northern Ireland, in firms where there still is discrimination. Because the problem of unemployment in Northern Ireland is so enormous, with 21% unemployed, that we would not want action that actually would withdraw investment and lead to disemployment. And, in fact, I could think of nothing more dangerous for the Catholic population than to take action that would throw out of work Protestant workers in the different parts of Belfast, for example, to unleash their fury on the very unprotected Catholic people in many of these areas. So that we wouldn't be in favour of disinvestment but we are very much in favour of and have ourselves taken up with the British Government on many occasions the question of insuring the end of discrimination.

It has to be said that in Northern Ireland, unlike South Africa, there are indeed some laws against

discrimination, the legal structure is there opposing discrimination but we don't feel that those laws have been adequately enforced; they haven't ended discrimination. I recognise that no amount of laws will end it completely or quickly. In a place like Harland & Wolfe's, even if they decided to adopt a very active policy of recruiting Catholics, they wouldn't get any applicants because not many Catholics would risk going into the shipyard from the point of view of their life and safety. Laws alone don't change things. There are laws but we don't think that there are enough resources put into enforcing them and more needs to be done. Some pressure along the lines of the MacBride Principles, to ensure that American firms live up to the standard they should be living up to, will certainly help. I have no criticism of that at all.

In Northern Ireland itself, the Fair Employment Agency takes the view that, on the whole American firms, have a good record but I have received some information here in relation to this which questions this with respect to specific American firms: a slightly different picture to the one that I had in respect to some of them. I am very glad to have that. We ourselves will follow that up.

So I don't think that there is really any disagreement about that.

On the "Special Envoy", this could in particular circumstances be very helpful. The only reason I hesitate about it at the moment is that we have been engaged in a bilateral negotiation with the British Government for the last 12 months which is now quite far advanced. I don't want you to think that just because it is so far advanced it is going to succeed, it may be quite far advanced towards failing; we don't know yet but a lot of work has been done. We're now coming up against certain crunch issues. In any negotiation the easier part is at the beginning, then things begin to emerge and you begin to see where the difficulty is. And there are outstanding issues and I don't know if we can bridge the gap. I am not certain of it - it's 50/50. I would say that I do not now doubt the seriousness of intent of the British Government for the first time in many years in trying to reach agreement.

The fact is that they have adopted a common analysis with us, the New Ireland Forum analysis, of the nature of the problem, that is the need to give full equal value to the identities of the

two traditions within Northern Ireland, and not to have any second class citizens. The fact that we and they are trying to make progress on the same set of principles means that there is some hope of getting somewhere. We won't know for some time, several months probably, whether we can overcome the crunch issues and, even if we do, there will be still technical points to be sorted out which might take some time, so we may be several months away from knowing whether we will succeed or fail. But as we are so advanced in this bilateral negotiation, at this particular moment the intervention of somebody else in the situation wouldn't, I think, advance things in this negotiation because we are so far down the road with it. If it failed, we would have a very serious situation. Although people are rightly sceptical or uncertain as to whether we are going to succeed, hopes aren't too high. If we have to announce that we have failed, if the best efforts of the Irish Government have failed to persuade the British Government to make the necessary minimal amount of movement to make progress, real progress on the problem, the result will be very bad for everybody. At that point, indeed, it might be extremely helpful to have others outside of the two islands begin to express their concern and a

"Special Envoy" might be a very appropriate way to do that and indeed it might help. I fear if these negotiations break down it might be very hard to retrieve them even with the help of something like that. I think that at the moment we are at the stage of the negotiations where I don't think that any outsider can help us. We really have to see it through to the end and see if we can overcome their reservations and convince them that our efforts deserve to succeed. So the "Special Envoy" in principle, yes; perhaps some time in the past, yes; perhaps, if we fail, in a couple of months time. But just at this precise moment, I don't think he'd be able to help very much until we see if we can sort out what we're trying to sort out with the British Government.