



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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An Interview with Peter Robinson +  
BY R. DEUTSCH

So, first of all, what were your reactions to the anglo-irish agreement as D.U.P. deputy leader ?

Well I think the whole Unionist community in N.I. was stunned by the agreement, particularly as it affected everybody, it affected the people that live in N.I., yet their political leaders had never as much as been consulted by the British Government. They haven't spoken to one Unionist leader indicating what might be in the agreement or what he might want to have in the agreement. They were left completely out in the cold, yet the Nationalist community, their leader Mr. Hume was consulted throughout by the Government of the Irish Republic and had his direct input into the terms of that agreement. So, first of all, we want to be consulted. Having not been consulted, we thought at least the Government might seek the consent of the people of N.I. for their agreement and we ask the Government to hold a referendum to ask the people whether they believe this was a super form of Government to govern N.I.. They refused to do that. As a result of that, we resigned our seat at Westminster to cause elections to be held in the province which showed that 71% of the people that voted voted against the anglo-irish agreement. That was a democratic way to do it and it showed quite clearly the people in Ulster do not accept to have a foreign Government having a say, an influential say in the internal affairs of N.I.. In fact what it means is that the minister of a foreign power has a greater say in the decisions affecting the lives of my constituents than I do. Now is that fair ? Is that just ? I am elected by the people of N.I., he's not, yet he takes the decisions

+ in Belfast, March 13, 1986

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and I don't and that's what the anglo-irish agreement means to the people in N.I.. So quite clearly we don't accept, we'll never accept as a means of Government for this province and we will take whenever action necessary to bring it down.

*The Secretary of State, Tom King has said the Unionists were saying lies about the effect of that anglo-irish agreement that it was not as bad as that. What do you say to that ?*

Well, he must think that the people of N.I. are fools. The people of N.I. have over the last three and a half months have the opportunity to read the agreement for themselves.

*Was it printed anywhere ?*

X  
It was printed in all the newspapers in full and in some of those newspapers several times. On top of that we have been going round the province reading sections of the agreement to them. I've challenged the Secretary of State that he believes that the interpretation we've put upon the agreement was false let him put a copy of that agreement in every letter box in this province and let the people decide who is telling the truth and who is telling lies. I suspect the reason he does do that. He doesn't want the people to find out the full detail in the agreement for he knows rightly that as soon as they read the Agreement that they will find out that the Republic of Ireland has a greater say in the affairs of N.I. than he's telling they do have.

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*So the way to show your disapproval was to have a strike on Monday the third of March.*

The first way to show our disapproval was to have an election, which we did. The Government obviously don't think too much of the democratic process and they ignored the vote of the people. The two leaders met Mrs. Thatcher. They indicated to her that the ballot box had spoken in N.I.. They asked her to enter into negotiations with them on the basis that the Agreement would not be implemented for the period of time those negotiations lasted and the Prime Minister wasn't willing to do that. Having scorned and spurned the democratic process we were left with no other opportunity to express ourselves on the constitutional way to the Prime Minister and therefore we had to take a first step, I mean I'm clear it's only a first step the strike actually we did on Monday the third of March.

*To the rest of the world, and certainly to western Europe, the pictures seen on the screen were extremely violent ones and they weren't expecting such a violent strike. How can you explain that ?*

Well the strike wasn't violent at all. Hundreds of thousands of people in this province refuse to go to work. The industries in N.I. came into a stand still. Nothing was produced in N.I. that day. The retail outlets across the province close down, the schools in most cases close down and you have a situation where virtually the province was a ghost province for that day.

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As a direct spontaneous result of the call of the two Unionist Party leaders, later on on that day violence occurred and I have to tell you that in N.I. standards it was really minimal the violence. Nobody was killed during that day, nobody was seriously injured and there has been more talk about the violence that have occurred on Monday the third of March than there has been of the 12 people were killed by the IRA and that's hypocrisy on the British Government and on the British press as far as the violence is concerned. There was some cars burnt, there were some lorries burnt, there were some premises damaged. In N.I. terms I have to tell you that is fairly minor stuff and all I can say is that I don't believe the way forward is through violence. If I believed that I would have been a paramilitary rather than a politician.

But I have to tell you the people of N.I. are so angry and once you set aside the ballot box, once you say that the people democracy is not the way forward, once you tell them there is no way that they can succeed in bringing down the anglo-irish Agreement by constitutional means, then those people would look for other ways to express their resentment and anger and it was inevitable that the Prime Minister would turn the people toward violence rather than allowing when he refused them the opportunity of using the democratic process to bring down the agreement.

*You say the strike was the first step, what other steps do you have in mind ?*

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Well, all I will say to you is this: we will show this government that they cannot govern without the consent of the people of N.I.. On Monday the third of March the Secretary of State was marooned in Stormont Castle. He couldn't put his nose outside the door. He had to have a specially set up studio in Stormont Castle to do interviews. He knew on Monday the third of March he did not rule N.I. and it was clear to him then if ever it was to be clear to him, that he could not govern N.I. without the consent of the people that live here. Now we are not political serfs, we have some self-respect in N.I.. We want to be treated the same way as our fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom. We're not asking for special privileges. All we're asking for is equality and fairplay. And the second step, we'll have further demonstrations to show that he cannot govern without the consent of the people of N.I.. Those demonstrations may take the form of elected representatives refusing to carry out the functions that I've now been taking from them by the presence of a foreigner in our country, it can take the form of us refusing to make payments to the Government of some selected items...

*Like a rent and rates strike ?*

It could take many forms. I'm not ruling any out and I'm not indicating what any particular proposals we have in mind may be. But it obviously could include rent and rates strikes, it could include refusal to pay television licenses, it could include the refusal to pay car tax and a whole series of things

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are possible as far as it is concerned. It can be any form of civil disobedience. The Government would decide where we stop in our protest against the anglo-irish Agreement. The one thing I can tell you is we will go on until the anglo-irish Agreement stops and the Prime Minister has a choice. Does she want to dismantle it through political means or is she going to see it dismantled around her by action on the streets ?

*They said today there are more troops coming over.*

They haven't got enough troops in the United Kingdom to contain the anger of the Unionist Community in N.I., if they want to confront the Unionist community in N.I.. She will be far better to keep our troops at home and use her head and to try to negotiate with her around the table on a proper peaceful and sensible business. The troops won't quell the anger of the Unionist community and that's what she's aiming to do I'm afraid, she's better think it again.

*That means confrontation and probably violent confrontation ?*

Well I would have thought that if some body is sending troops to the province, that means confrontation, yes.

*And will you in that case confront the troops if the worst comes to the worst ?*

What kind of people will the world think we were if we simply allow ourselves to be dictated by a Government that

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doesn't have one representative elected from the people of N.I. ? We are a legitimate part of the United Kingdom, the active Union which shows N.I. to be part of the United Kingdom indicates that we are to be treated in exactly the same manner as the rest of the U.K.. This Agreement treats us in a different manner. We don't accept a treatment of a different manner to the rest of the U.K.. If she wants to treat us in any different way, then she needs our permission as well as the permission of Parliament to treat us in a different manner. And I put it to the Prime Minister. She is the one that is opting for confrontation. She is the one who has decided to walk other than on the democratic road and we will obviously bring down the anglo-irish Agreement preferably by political means but if it's not political means, it would be because she has chosen a different ground to fight.

*So it could mean armed actions on both sides then ?*

Well I hope that it never comes to that but the Prime Minister is the person to ask the question to. She would decide how far Ulster has to resist?

*What I meant is that if you have to come to that extreme action, you'll do it ?*

There are no circumstances. Well I will accept the anglo-irish Agreement as a form of Government for N.I.. It's not acceptable to me and I will take whenever action necessary to bring it down.

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*For some people seen from the continent, your action seems to be a dead end within an impulse because all you have left to do now is either fight against the British Army or declare U.D.I.. Is that how you said ?*

*Well if you're saying to me that it's perceived outside of the U.K. what needs to also be perceived outside the U.K. is that we didn't choose the situation for ourselves, it was one the Prime Minister of the U.K. has placed us in. She's the one that brought the Agreement about without even consulting us. She is the one that is pushing us through with negotiating with us. And whatever happens in N.I. is upon her head. She has chosen the form of confrontation. And all we're doing as Ulster people is meeting the confrontation that she has sought.*

*Well, we'll come back to the positive aspect of the discussion just to finish this part. Since 1969 for the most of the French Press anyway or the French Media in the Protestants are seen as the baddies of this fight. How come ? You don't have a good P.R. man to do the job there ?*

*No, then you don't have a protestant press either to have a fair unbiased view of that. The press by and large is a Roman Catholic Press throughout this world. It's certainly the case in the U.K. essentially a Roman Catholic Press. And I don't suspect that the Roman Catholic Press is going to go against the Roman Catholic community in N.I. and tell*

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a good story about the Protestant Community. I happen to have been brought up in a working class area in Belfast. There was no right that I enjoyed that my fellow Roman Catholic citizens didn't enjoy. The houses that my fellow Protestants were living in were no better and no worse than the houses that were being lived in by the Roman Catholic Community. The only difference might have been that is in the ratio of the population, the Roman Catholic Community has slightly more than of their share of the public sector housing in N.I.. As far as discrimination is concerned, there has always been a tendency for areas in N.I. to have a political or religious flavour. Roman Catholic have gathered together and lived in an area which can be then described as a Roman Catholic district of the City or of the province. In that area you will find that the industries and the businesses that are there, will be having employed them. Roman Catholics just as in the province whereas, you'll have a majority of Protestants employed. Is that discrimination? It's a geographical factor which has caused a lot of the polarisation in employment to take place. So I mean all of the propaganda can be answered. Are there willing ears to hear them?

*Well I think so. I mean I'm surprised that so far has been nobody on the Unionist side coming over, say Europe, for a grand tour, express their views because Sinn Fein for example does it everyday.*

Well, again there are people in Europe. We have members in the European Assembly who have argued all of these points.

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The very factor that you haven't heard it indicates that the messenger hasn't been so willing to carry out from the Unionist populations representatives in the European Assembly. I'm of course in front of a messenger of the press.

*I agree.*

The press in N.I. particularly I have found, is not a press that relates the news to the viewer or listener or reader. It is someone who forms an opinion and gives their opinions to the listener, the viewer and the reader. And I don't think there is a rule of the press. I think they should give the facts and let the people make up their minds.

*Now we go back to the positive aspect. Nicolas Scott, one of the Minister here was in Paris about a month ago or so, and he expressed the views that the Government, the British Government, was ready to have talks with the Unionists. Would you go then to those talks ?*

Well, the Prime Minister Nicolas Scott, incidental to the whole process...

*He was the one who was the envoy. But I mean...*

Yes, well, you have my sympathy if he was there. The Prime Minister who is an important person in the dispute, for she's the one who have signed the Agreement, has had it put to her plainly by the two Unionist leaders, that as she refused to

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consult them at the first place, if she now wants to negotiate with them, then she must agree that she will not implement the anglo-irish Agreement for the period of time those negotiations last. I recognized it might have been best for us to argue the Agreement should come to an end or she'll be smashed and we won't talk until then. But I think it's unrealistic to ask a Prime Minister to take that step before she enters into negotiations. So as a reasonable compromise, we have suggested that she freezes it, that she puts it on ice, or she suspends it, if she agrees no implement, she can use whenever form of words that she wishes. But for the period those negotiations last, there will be no meeting of the inter-governmental conference, and the Secretariat would not be in action. Now she agrees to that. Then we will sit down and we will talk to her on the constitutional Party in N.I. about structures that will bring peace and stability, for in case it has been forgotten in all the mêlée of the last few months, it was peace, stability, reconciliation and cooperation. Well the goal set by the two governments who signed the Agreement, this is what the anglo-irish Agreement was to bring. What do we have ? The I.R.A., the Roman Catholic terrorist organisation has continued its bombing and its shootings. Do you have disorder on the streets ? Your political instability such as we have never had for many years in this province. The Protestant and the Catholic community are further apart down everywhere and there isn't the slightest opportunity for cooperation between the people of N.I. and the Republic

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of Ireland because they see that the Republic of Ireland has been aggressors. So all of the goals are now further away from being achieved and done everywhere, and yet that was the reason that the two Governments signed the anglo-irish Agreement. Now if they want to achieve those goals, and there are pandable goals for anybody to want to achieve and nobody will want them more than the people who are living here. We want peace. I have three children to bring up in this province, nobody wants it more than I do. I don't want to have my children having to look everyday at bullets proof windows at home, at policemen guarding my house, having to watch their father go out with police guards. That's not a kind of future that I want to N.I.. So nobody wants to achieve peace and stability more that I do. But it can't be achieved under this Agreement. Therefore we have to find a way forward.

*What would you suggest then at the Conference ?*

Well, I have proposals to put and so have my colleagues. But do we throw them into a vacuum ? We have a Prime Minister who has said that she isn't willing to consider an alternative to this Agreement. Under that principle, it would be mad of me to throw it into a vacuum a proposal which was not going to be considered seriously by the Government. If she sets up the climate for that negotiation to take place, then quite clearly proposals will be put forward by the Unionist leadership. And she has the advantage of course in such negotiations and we recognize her, because if we

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feel to get agreements on those negotiations, she can fall back on the anglo-irish Agreement. So she has all the opportunity she would want to meet a magnanimous Unionist leader at such negotiations. If she is willing to talk, it's up to her to decide.

*Article eleven would allow that because article eleven is an open section.*

Well, article eleven permits a review of the anglo-irish Agreement either after three years or earlier if either of the two parties ask one. She can do it if she wants. It's the case whether the Prime Minister wants to have excuse the terminology a hard man image to go forward for the next election or rather she is prepared to try and get peace and stability in N.I.. A Prime Minister, in my view, who wants simply to get some electoral advantage are to see her presented in the opinion polls rise at the expense of death and destruction of N.I. isn't the kind of Prime Minister that United Kingdom should have.

*In case there is discussion and whatever reason either the anglo-irish Agreement is put on ice, maybe all sorts of the arrangements, those discussions, could they lead towards the election of a new Assembly ?*

I would have thought that it was essential to have some form of stable structure for N.I. and quite clearly there would need to be an election for everybody was created

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from such negociation, yes. That is inevitable. And I'll go further. It means that we have to work our relationship, and N.I. would be, under those circumstances, with the Government of the Irish Republic, for whether we like and whether we don't, we both share the same Island and there are matters of mutual concern tourism, agriculture, energy or whatever which traverse the boarder, I'm quite clearly we have to come to some arrangement with them, so it's not just a case of getting an arrangement, that suits the community within N.I., we have to work out what our relationship would be with the neighbouring state.

*And would you in that Assembly ask for complete dévolution ?*

I would like to see what we call devolution of all the powers formerly held by the 1972, pre 1972 Parliament in N.I.. I suspect that would not immediatly be available because they have power over the security forces in N.I. and I think that's likely to remain with Westminster for some time. Until trust is built up sufficiently for a government in N.I. to be trusted with the control of the R.U.C. and the local security forces.

*Would that kind of new government be a longer alliance of power sharing ?*

Well, I don't think we should specify the type of government it's going to be. Because I would begin to answer question that I refused to answer earlier. All I can say is that it

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must be a Government that is based upon democratic principles, and it must be a structure that has a significant, a meaningful role for minorities in N.I.. And it must be a structure that secures the constitutional rights of the minority parties and at the same time secures individual human rights of every person that lives here. And a Government that has no intention of discriminating against anyone shouldn't be at least concerned about whatever measures are brought into save guard against discrimination.

*When you talk about democratic role, are you talking about majority role ?*

Well, I have been brought up to look towards the British system of Government, but even the British system of Government allows certain varieties and there are preferences that one could suggest. That give a role, a significant role within the structure for representatives of minority parties, I don't think we should specify particularly because that's a kind of thing that comes out throughout negotiation. One takes a fixed point of view before you enter into negotiations and you're bound by it during negotiations.

*Very often Europeans have the impression this image that Protestant politicians and Catholic politicians never talk to each other, never have a session, even say a cup of tea or a drink at the bar, is that true ?*

No, it's not true. Unfortunately where they could meet here in N.I. Assembly, the Catholic politicians are boycotting

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and refusing to come to the Assembly. Therefore the opportunity of meeting them is much less. There's only one Nationalist politician in the European Assembly. I noted in the newspaper that there were talks taking place between Dr. Paisley, the leader of my Party and Mr. John Hume, the leader of the S.D.L.P.. Perhaps it says something that become newspaper item when the two men are seen sitting for two hours over lunch talking. It might perhaps answer the questions better than I can do.

But I have had conversations in television studios after we have been on programs or perhaps at the House of Commons after votes have taken place. But those are the only opportunities one really has of meeting Nationalist politicians because they are refusing to come to the Assembly here. It's an irony that the people who want to end British role in N.I., the Catholic politicians are prepared to go to the British Parliament and refused to come to an N.I. Assembly to sit down with what they would call fellow Irishmen.

*I think it is not easy to explain. Right, I think if there is anything you would like to add to make this a little clearer, have we covered all the ground ?*

The more I can add would make it more confused.

*We have seen basically everything.*

.../...

Well basically all that I'm saying is there are two roads N.I. can take. One is the road of negotiation and I think that if the politicians representing both sections of the community in N.I. take that road, then we can negotiate and politics is about give and take, it is about barter and under those circumstances, I believe that an Agreement can be hammered out. Not everybody in the province is going to like it, but then, you know Salomon himself would find a significant task to get everyone in N.I. to agree to some proposal but I believe that's a way forward, because if we go the road that we are on the time, with the British Government representing the immovable objet, and the Unionist community representing the irresistible force, then there's going to be a collision that will cause devastation in this province.

*Maybe another question just to dispel any wrong ideas. Very often people in France believe that the Northern Irish politicians never go to the South, I mean apart from business, on holidays for example.*

I use to go regularly to the Republic of Ireland for holidays before the troubles started in 1968. I spent I'm sure three other of the last four years before the troubles started in 1968 holidays in the Republic of Ireland. I have only been in the Republic on one occasion since then and that was for a protest.

.../...

*Not exactly a holiday.*

*It wasn't a holiday. It was a protest of the interference of a foreign Government in the affairs of N.I.. I want to be friends with the people in the Republic of Ireland. I don't want to be in their family.*

*It's quite different indeed. O.K. thanks a lot.*

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