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PRESS CONFERENCE WITH SINN FEIN - 20 FEBRUARY 1998

DODI MCGUINNESS

First of all I would like to thank you all for coming along here and I would like to welcome you. We have the people on the front row who were in at the meeting with the British and Irish Governments. Gerry O'Hara who is chair of the 6 county *** beside him Gerry Kelly, Martin McGuinness, Gerry Adams, myself Dodi McGuinness and Francie Molloy. And the other people that we have with us are some of our elected representatives and we have just done the meeting that we requested, the face to face meeting with the two Governments where they have presented us with their position. Gerry will respond to a prepared text that we have and we will then take questions and answers. There are a lot of you here so if we could just work it through the chair and people identifying themselves it would be the best way to deal with this.

GERRY ADAMS

As you probably know by now and in fact some of you had it in your news broadcasts earlier the British Government, the Irish Government have expelled Sinn Fein from this talks process. I actually haven't been in touch with Mitchel McLaughlin who is our party chair and he has been representing us with other members of our leadership at the court case in Dublin. But I do think that there is a point worth noting that before the High Court could come to its decision that the Governments announced theirs. I have asked and I am seeking urgent meetings with the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the British Prime Minister Tony Blair to discuss with them the crisis created by today's decision. There is clearly a credibility problem with the talks process. The exclusion of Sinn Fein on the word of an RUC man underlines the serious flaws in the system which the two Governments set up. It is up to the two Governments to rectify this urgently. The decision to expel our party is a disgraceful decision. The process by which this decision was reached lacks any notion of natural justice or fairness. At the stroke of a pen this decision attempts to silence and to disenfranchise the 175,000 people who vote for our party nationally. It makes all of those people 175,000 people whose vote don't count. It is undemocratic and it is an attack on the democratic rights of everyone, not just the Sinn Fein voters who have worked for a democratic peace settlement. The British Government indictment is without any foundation whatsoever. Sinn Fein has no case to answer and during three days of intense discussions in Dublin the British Government failed to produce any evidence whatsoever to support its indictment. We have worked tirelessly with others to build an effective peace process. That work has been set to naught. We have honoured absolutely every commitment we have made and today's decision makes no positive contribution whatsoever to the effective search for peace. It benefits only those

who seek to prevent change and who have sought from the very beginning to subvert this process and the hopes of a lasting peace settlement. It should be remembered that the indictment was initiated by an assessment from the RUC. It should be remembered that the RUC, the securocrats within the RUC and within the wider system are still wedded to the old agendas and the old mindsets. And it should be remembered that a major influence in the determination handed out today was the threat from the Ulster Unionist Party to withdraw from talks if Sinn Fein was not excluded. The two Governments have once again bowed to the threats of David Trimble and to the will of the securocrats within its own system. The events of the recent days have highlighted the double standards involved. Physical expediency rules. It raises the entire question of who is in charge, the securocrats or the Governments. Sinn Fein leadership and party are absolutely determined to defend the democratic rights of our electorate and the integrity of the peace process. We remain totally wedded to our peace strategy and to the search for peace. To those people who may feel some sense of hope slipping away we can only say for our part that we will do everything possible but that it is not our responsibility alone to build a proper democratic peace settlement. The anger at the indictment against us is palpable particularly in nationalist areas throughout the north and it is evident throughout Ireland and I want to appeal to everyone to everyone to stay calm, to channel their anger and their frustration if they wish to into calm and disciplined protest. On my way here I saw a heavy presence of RUC at the Short Strand, the small Catholic enclave. We have been receiving reports over the last number of days about build-ups in British troops and RUC presence in other nationalist areas. They should be withdrawn. They are provocative, they are unnecessary, they are unwanted and they are unneeded. Now is the time in our view for everyone and I want to emphasise this point if they wish to demonstrate to do so in a peaceful and democratic manner. It is our democratic right to do this but it is of the utmost importance that people remain calm in so doing. Sinn Fein's peace strategy has always been about resolving conflict. Everyone has a responsibility to avert any further slide back into conflict and to ensure that the opportunity for peace which has been undermined by today's decision is built upon and not wasted and that remains Sinn Fein's commitment.

QUESTION

How are you going to pull along the republicans who feel that Sinn Fein has been wasting their time in the peace process. They are going to see that they are right it has all been a waste of time, you have just been ejected like UDP?

GERRY ADAMS

FROM NIO PRESS OFFICE

(FRI) 02. 20' 98 19:30/ST. 19:23/NO. 3580104492 (23)

well that is our job. That is our responsibility. But we can only use our influence when others also accept that it is our responsibility also that this cannot be brought back just to Sinn Fein that it has to include the Governments and it has to include the editorial writers and it has to include the church leaders, the trade union leaders, it has to include the leaders of all the other political parties. Perhaps the direct answer to your question is that as well as calling for an urgent meeting with Mr Blair and with Mr Ahern that I will also seek urgent meetings between our party leadership and the leaderships of the other parties.

QUESTION

Any indication of when you will be readmitted into the talks?

GERRY ADAMS

Are we giving any indication?

QUESTION

Were you given any indication?

GERRY ADAMS

The indictment handed to us and I haven't studied it I think says we will be back on 9 March. For us the fact that we have been expelled at all is the key point. Our integrity, is involved here, our commitment to and the efforts we have made to build a proper process is on the line here and we will of course go off and study this determination but it is an indictment which should not have been brought at all against our party.

QUESTION

You said that you were *** Prime Minister is there any indication that you will be blocked from those meetings during the period your party is expected to be out of the talks?

GERRY ADAMS

That is a matter for the Governments to decide. We had a relatively short meeting with them. They gave us the determination. I asked for a copy of the press statement because I think that is where the line would be and we read that and I then asked for a meeting with

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the Taoiseach as a matter of urgency and a meeting with the British Prime Minister and we didn't further elaborate on any of these points.

QUESTION

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GERRY ADAMS

We will answer that question after we have had those meetings and after we have some sense that the two principles that is the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister are prepared to rectify the situation which has been created by our expulsion.

QUESTION

I think some people would feel that despite what you think Sinn Fein have got off lightly.....

GERRY ADAMS

Who Dennis?

MEDIA

Loyalists

GERRY ADAMS

We'll say that Dennis.

MEDIA

OK Loyalists would say you have got off lightly what do you say to them?

GERRY ADAMS

We'll first of all I myself in many ways feel that the arithmetic by which those who have been killed is measured in terms of these days and it was put for me most eloquently when I learned that there is going to be effort to get us back for St Patrick's Day so nothing else matters except expediency. So I think that that is my first response to what you are saying.

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Secondly the unionist party has done nothing within this process to reach out, to listen, to talk and we don't care what they say because it is only by all of us meeting in our own terms, all of us saying what we believe in that we would get some sense of what accommodation is possible so I would have to treat any remark from the unionist Party from those who have marched up and down Garvaghy Road, from those who have pranced in and out of nationalist areas from those who have come in here flanked by the representatives of the loyalist death squads, from those who have gone in to talk to convicted killers and who won't even talk to us. So I think all of that has to be judged in that context.

QUESTION

What do you think the consequences of ****

GERRY ADAMS

Well I think it is apparent you are the Journalist, any peace process needs equality, if it is to succeed. You have been here for a very long time. You know what it was like before 94, you know how difficult it was, you know how and I remember you interviewing me and me telling you there would be peace, there would be peace talks, there would be ... and quite rightly you were sceptical about that and we worked, the men and women of this party hard to bring about that situation. So the consequences have to be weighed up in that context because the one thing that has emerged you see very very clearly it takes all sides to make peace. It takes all sides to make peace and until all sides decide to make peace and some people have not yet decided to make peace then the Governments have to take risks, have to take real leadership roles. Have to be challenging the status quo and Mr Blair tells us and tells the world the status quo has to change - well then that is the responsibility for him to bring about the necessary change.

QUESTION

Have you lost faith in the peace process at the moment?

MARTIN MCGUINNESS

I would answer that this way. I think it important that those people who were in Dublin with us on Monday reflect that both Governments were spinning to yourselves that Sinn Fein would be out of the talks and actually would return on 9 March. That is what the date was that was running around Dublin on Monday and it was clear to us then at that stage that we

were not going to get a fair hearing. That without a scrap of evidence being placed before us we were going to be put out of the talks. I said a short time after that that if the British Government had their way we would be out. Well we are out but we are not down. We are absolutely committed to our quest for equality, for justice, for peace and for freedom and there is still much work to be done. I see all this as another challenge, another obstacle and out of this has to come I think an effective peace process in which people recognise the need for a real engagement on all sides. Let's not fool ourselves about what has been happening within these talks for the last 7-8 months. Of the major parties within the talks the Ulster Unionist party won't break breath to Sinn Fein because they are not prepared to talk, why are they not prepared to talk? Because they are not prepared for change. They don't want to see fundamental political and constitutional change so their tactics is effectively to destroy from within the peace process. They have combined forces even before we come into the talks they combined forces on the decommissioning issue. They have combined forces yet again with the securorats in the British Military establishment who basically are unionists and who are also totally opposed to this process. And their strategy, the combined strategy of unionism and the securorats was always going to be a real danger to this process. Now we have endured I think a very serious blow to our peace strategy we are not under any illusions about that. There can be no question about it. The question really is what do we do about it. And if people think that we are going to go away not in a million years. Sinn Fein is a growing, vibrant, political party which is being supported every day by increasing numbers within our communities and on the Island of Ireland. So therefore if there is to be a peace settlement we are key to that and we have responsibilities. We are acutely aware of our responsibilities, we are going to live up to our responsibilities, we are going to represent the people who elect us. We are not going to allow them to be treated as second class citizens and we are going to continue the struggle for freedom, justice and peace and for an effective peace process. So we are not going away and I think that the message coming out of all of this is that yes we have been put out of the talks but we see it as a challenge. And the challenge not just for us but for everybody else is how do we get peace in Ireland. We can't get peace in Ireland if we haven't got a meaningful peace process in which people are prepared to negotiate and enter into dialogue with one another. We will continue to work for that.

QUESTION

Will you foresee parallel meetings with the parties outside Castle grounds?

GERRY ADAMS

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I will write to and am now calling for meetings with those other parties. We are especially looking for the meetings I have already requested with the British Prime Minister and with the Taoiseach.

QUESTION

Is that separately or together?

GERRY ADAMS

I don't think we have any choice in that Dennis.

QUESTION

What I wanted to put to you is this. Has the now recent situation where is if nobody had gied the whole propaganda way between the Governments and Sinn Fein is *** that people have died?

GERRY ADAMS

Let me say that I have constantly been mindful, constantly been mindful that this present crisis started with the killing of two people in Belfast. Because of the recent bereavement with my own family I am constantly mindful of the ongoing trauma which those families must be facing. But the double standards which are involved here are so obvious now, are so clear now and there must be no clouding, no clouding of the imperative which is dialogue in order to bring about an end to killing. When the Taoiseach in Linster House says he has seen no evidence against Sinn Fein and when the leadership of the British Government is able to say that it understands and recognises the courage of the Sinn Fein leadership of bringing risks square that, square that if us being ejected from that process and work out how in any way that can help to bring an end to the killings.

QUESTION

Do you feel in any sense that republican protection might be working to **** you as a political leader?

GERRY ADAMS

There is no republican ejected our party from these talks.....

QUESTION

Republicans might have killed, I am not casting aspersion but there is a danger that republicans have actually killed, now are those people the killing people, are they undermining your position given your commitment. I feel a lot of people accepts your commitment to the peace process.

GERRY ADAMS

First of all the big word in all that you said is a two letter word 'if' and there has been no evidence presented to substantiate any charge that republicans have been involved in recent killings. Let's bring this down to what I was saying to Dennis Murray early on. A lot of you people are around a long time, around as long as any of us, was it better before 1994 or has it been better since 1994 despite the fact that there have been set backs and have we played a role against all the odds in making it better at least to the point where it may have been possible to build a proper equitable democratic peace settlement. That is the question that has to be asked. And the question also has to be asked does our expulsion from these talks and the double standards and the flaws which have been highlighted as a result of that, does that help the quest for a lasting peace or does it hinder it.

QUESTION

Do you think any real work can be done inside ***

GERRY ADAMS

That is a matter for the people who are in there. I want to repeat again and I was asked - I just want to explain this to you - the other day when we were coming out of Dublin Castle I made an appeal for people, whatever the decision was going to be made to be calm. And some of you then went on and said that this must be that Sinn Fein in some way has some hint of believes or is accepting what was going to be the outcome - It wasn't that at all. We simply were faced with the largest media presence that we had and we wanted to get that message out to as wide an audience as possible. I just wanted to explain that to you in case people, as I heard some of you understandably perhaps presented it in that way. We will only get peace if there is the basis and the process and the structures which can allow that to become organic and allow that to grow. We will only get peace when the Government's face up to their responsibilities and especially the British Government faces up to its current and

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historic responsibility and we will only get peace if all political leaders accept the imperative of equality and of dialogue and we will only get peace folks, because you live here, when people take ownership of it. That it shouldn't be left to the politicians, it shouldn't be left to the people who do the killing, it shouldn't be left to a high wire act. And this decision today clearly is a huge setback to both the work that we have done, to the work that other people have done. But it has to be overcome. And I want to repeat what Martin said earlier. Sinn Fein is out but Sinn Fein is not down. And we want to call upon everyone else who wants to see a lasting peace settlement in their own small way to peacefully demonstrate that desire, because it needs an inclusive process based upon equality to bring that about.