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For: ALLIANCE PARTY HQ  
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Message:

TAOISEACHS REPLY TO  
PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS, 14 MAY 1996  
HEREWITH

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QUESTION NOS: 4 TO 11

DÁIL QUESTIONS addressed to the Taoiseach  
by Deputies Bertie Ahern, Mary Harney and Dermot Ahern  
for ORAL ANSWER on Tuesday, 14th May, 1996.

QUESTION NO: 4

To ask the Taoiseach the plans, if any, he has to reallocate responsibilities within the Government in view of the conflicting demands likely to be made by the peace process, the forthcoming all-party talks and by the forthcoming Presidency of the EU.  
- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 5

To ask the Taoiseach the Government's view of what reinstatement of the August, 1994 IRA cease-fire would involve.  
- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 6

To ask the Taoiseach the plans, if any, he has to visit Northern Ireland prior to the forthcoming elections and all-party negotiations.  
- Mary Harney.

QUESTION NO: 7

To ask the Taoiseach the measures, if any, that have been taken by the Government to fulfil the commitment in Paragraph 6 of the Downing Street Declaration to examine elements in the democratic life and organisation of the Irish State that can be represented as a substantial threat to the life and ethos of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland.  
- Mary Harney.

QUESTION NO: 8

To ask the Taoiseach whether he intends to be present at the commencement of all-party talks on 10 June 1996.  
- Mary Harney.

QUESTION NO: 9

To ask the Taoiseach if he will report on his telephone discussions with the British Prime Minister on Wednesday, 8 May 1996.  
- Mary Harney.

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QUESTION NO: 10

To ask the Taoiseach the plans, if any, he has, in conjunction with the British Prime Minister, to attend the opening of all-party talks on 10 June 1996.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 11

To ask the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on his latest contacts with the British Prime Minister.

- Dermot Ahern.

REPLY.

I propose to take Questions 4 to 11 together.

The British Prime Minister and I reviewed by phone on Wednesday and again yesterday developments in the lead up to the all-party negotiations. We exchanged ideas on how further reassurances might usefully be given to all the potential participants in the all-party negotiations to the effect that these will be both meaningful and substantive, and we will seriously address the issues of concern to the parties. I do not believe it appropriate to give further details of the conversations. However, as I said in this House on 23 April, a decision on the composition of the Government delegation will be made in due course. I am satisfied that, notwithstanding the demands on Government arising from our forthcoming EU Presidency and the commencement of all-party negotiations, it is not necessary to reallocate Ministerial functions. The peace process and the all-party negotiations will of course continue to command a very high priority.

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The British Prime Minister and I are both committed to the success of the negotiations. We will do whatever is necessary, consistent with democratic principles, to secure such an outcome. As I have said on a number of occasions, the attainment of that objective requires that each other's allegiances, aspirations, identities and concerns are recognised and respected by both the Nationalist and Unionist traditions and by both Governments. In that regard, the Government will play our part in accordance with the commitment given in Paragraph 6 of the Joint Declaration. That commitment of course is set, in the Declaration, within the context of political talks involving the representatives of the Unionist community and we look forward to hearing their views at first hand in the negotiations themselves. As I said recently, the values of this State are pluralist. No one religious or political view is so dominant as to exclude others. Our constitution has had to be recast so as to reflect these pluralist values. I believe that our policy on Northern Ireland should also reflect these core pluralist values.

However, in advance of that, the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation established a sub-committee on obstacles in the South to reconciliation. It did a lot of useful work and had been close to finalising a report when it was decided to defer Forum meetings. With a restoration of the IRA ceasefire, it would be possible to bring that

work to completion and to publish the report. I very much hope that this can be done.

As the House will be aware, I had a meeting on Friday last with the UUP Leader, Mr. David Trimble. We had a cordial and constructive exchange of views on a number of important issues. While I cannot give further details, I can say however that the meeting was particularly useful in terms of creating a better mutual understanding of respective positions.

As I have said frequently in this House and elsewhere, the Government very much wish all parties, including Sinn Fein and the Loyalist parties, to be at the all-party negotiations and we are working very hard to create the conditions for this. These include the unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994. In practice, this would require the IRA to issue a clear and definitive statement, essentially in the form and terms used on 31 August 1994, that the ceasefire was being restored.

In answer to the Question on visits to Northern Ireland before 10 June, I have no such plans at present.

ENDS

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Blacks from 14/5/96.

(Add Nos: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10).

Mr. B. Ahern: I think we all agree that it would be very helpful if everyone was at the table on 10 June. I do not understand how the Taoiseach will manage the EU Presidency and Northern Ireland with no change in duties but obviously he has made up his mind on that matter. As I have stated on a number of occasions recently, there is no point in setting a date for talks if we do not involve ourselves in confidence building issues so as to bring people together on 10 June. I welcome the decision by the British Government last week to move on the Paddy Kelly issue. I understand it will make a statement tonight on the allocation of permanent funding to Meansc  il Feirste. Will the Taoiseach say if this is the case?

Having regard to the decision about Paddy Kelly, will the Taoiseach, in conjunction with the British Government, deal with the issue of loyalist and Nationalist prisoners in urging the resumption of a permanent ceasefire? This would ensure the resumption of a ceasefire and that there was a balance. Does the Taoiseach believe that prisoners due to be released from Irish prisons over the next few years could be released by Christmas 1997 at the latest in the event of the resumption of a ceasefire before 10 June?

The Taoiseach: I do not wish to be in any way evasive in my answers to the Deputy's questions but the ones about prisoners warrant separate treatment and special preparation. This applies, in particular, to his concrete suggestion about dates. This matter would more appropriately be addressed by the Minister for Justice. Obviously it is important to take account of each

individual case rather than adopt a blanket approach. As the House is well aware, during the ceasefire the Government took an advanced view about the early release of prisoners who had previously been associated with paramilitary organisations. That policy continued throughout the ceasefire and I would see no difficulty in resuming a policy of early release once the ceasefire is restored. The question of further measures might best be addressed by the Minister for Justice. I am very much aware of the need to show a compassionate view in regard to prisoner issues in terms of rebuilding a commitment to the political process in the communities in Northern Ireland where support for paramilitary violence has been strong in the past. A compassionate and reasonable view in regard to prisoner issues demonstrates to people in those communities that those in political authority are conscious of the sufferings which have been undergone, are aware of the feelings of those communities and are willing to demonstrate that politics can and does deliver results which are better than those delivered by violence.

On the question of Paddy Kelly, I welcome his transfer. This matter had engaged my attention over a long period in my discussions with the British Prime Minister, British Government officials and Ministers generally. Other Members of the House have also been actively involved to that end also.

On the question of Meanscoil Feirste, it is important to recall that at my first meeting the British Prime Minister within days of my assuming office I raised the issue of Meanscoil Feirste. While there have been some significant improvements in the position of Meanscoil Feirste since then, as a result of the representations made by me and others, further evidence of a commitment to

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respect the Irish language through this school can and should be given.

Section D follows



Mr. B. Ahern: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply on the prisoners issue. As he suggested, I will pursue it with the Minister for Justice, but it would be useful if he would use his offices with the British Prime Minister to, at least, set a target in terms of what would be possible in regard to loyalist and republican prisoners if there was a lasting ceasefire. I exclude from this those recently convicted of mass murder, I am talking about those who have a relatively short period of their sentence left to serve.

In his discussions on Friday last with Mr. Trimble did the Taoiseach manage to convince him of the benefits if Senator Mitchell was involved in the process?

The Taoiseach: Much as I would like to, I do not propose to go into the detail of my discussion with Mr. David Trimble. The value of meetings of this nature would be reduced if everything said at them was rerun publicly afterwards. The meeting was very useful. We covered all the relevant issues in a thorough way in a comparatively short space of time.

I am sorry that in my earlier rather lengthy reply that I did not advert to one aspect of the Deputy's first supplementary, that is, prisoner issues in Britain. I am very much aware of the concerns in the minds of many Deputies. I take opportunities as they arise frequently to raise them with the British Prime Minister. On all prisoner issues and release policies and so forth, account has to be taken, properly, of the perspective of the victims of crime who also have concerns. This has to be put in the context of the wider goal, that is, the restoration of peace and the establishment of the absolute paramountcy of

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politics as a way of resolving problems thereby removing violence from the equation once and for all.

Miss Harney: Does the ministerial ban on meetings with Sinn Féin extend to telephone contact? Is the Taoiseach optimistic, as a result of the contacts made with Sinn Féin, that the IRA ceasefire will be restored?

The Taoiseach: There are no contacts by Ministers with Sinn Féin. I am not able to give the Deputy the information she has mentioned in regard to telephone calls. I am not aware that any telephone contacts have been made. My own view is that they are covered by the present arrangements under which contacts should be made at official level. I am, at the same time, in a position to say that official level contacts have been reasonably intensive and fruitful and continue.

Mr. D. Ahern: When he was in Dublin last Friday Mr. Trimble outlined his views on cross Border economic co-operation and the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor. Was the Taoiseach disappointed with the views expressed and will he confirm that the Government will proceed, like all previous Governments, to promote cross Border co-operation and the Dublin-Belfast corridor?

The Taoiseach: It is important to make the point that in his public address Mr. Trimble did not set his face against cross Border co-operation, he made the obvious point that it is one form of co-operation that he wishes to see. He also

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wishes to see trade and economic development links in other directions also. That is something that we, in this jurisdiction, could hardly object to because we have trade and economic links in other directions also. He is perfectly entitled to hold the views that he expressed about job estimates associated with particular proposals and specific suggestions of corridors running in one direction in one part of the Border rather than in other directions in other parts of the Border. I have no doubt that others, like the Deputy, might disagree with them, but what is welcome is that the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party chose to come to Dublin and debate these issues in an open, forthright and honest way. Matters of this kind benefit from being the subject of open, forthright and honest debate. The maintenance of any artificial unanimity, as if there were one perceived view of everything, is not necessarily the way by which we will get the best out of the potential that exists.

*Deputy R. Burke rose.*

*An Ceann Comhairle:* Order, there are Deputies offering, but it must be clear to all concerned that the time available for dealing with questions to the Taoiseach is exhausted. I will, however, hear brief and relevant questions from the two Deputies offering. Let us have regard to the time factor. I did not make the rules, you did.

*Mr. D. Ahern:* We would love to change them.

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An Ceann Comhairle: That is your prerogative.

Mr. D. Ahern: They will not let us.

Mr. R. Burke: In his discussion with Mr. Trimble did the Taoiseach take the opportunity to raise with him the points raised in his speech in which he went much further than the issues of the Dublin-Belfast corridor and unemployment to the question of a cross Border body to deal with such a basic matter as tourism?

An Ceann Comhairle: I did ask for brevity.

Mr. R. Burke: How does that square with the commitment of the Taoiseach and the House that the Framework Document will be central to the talks process?

The Taoiseach: It is open to people to argue about particular functions, whether they should be conducted on a particular basis. What is not open to argument is that there is a requirement to have a strong structure of North-South co-operation. That is self-evident and accepted by virtually everybody.

Mr. D. Ahern: Except Mr. Trimble.

D6

The Taoiseach: The Framework Document, in making detailed provision on that matter, was doing something extremely useful and practical in giving expression in a concrete institutional way to the all Ireland reality. One also recognises, as the Framework Document did, that there are other dimensions to the problem and other spheres for co-operation and joint work, including the east-west sphere of activity and work within the various jurisdictions. The Deputy need have no fear about the commitment of the Government to a strong North-South institutional dimension which will allow for the full range of practical economic co-operation to develop in an organic way.

Section E follows

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E1

DAIL EIREANN

3.10

14 May 1998

Miss Harney: While I accept that the Taoiseach's meeting with Mr. Trimble was intended to be a private meeting - that probably would have been more productive from the point of view of both parties - nonetheless it is now a matter of public record. Did the Taoiseach get the impression that Mr. Trimble was in a positive frame of mind in his approach to the all-party negotiations? Does the Taoiseach believe that Mr. Trimble is willing to compromise in the context of those negotiations as a result of his talks with him?

The Taoiseach: It is always risky for anybody to attempt to characterise another person's point of view; there is always a risk that you will not understand it precisely as the person in question would wish. My impression both in terms of the alacrity with which Mr. Trimble agreed to the meeting and the way in which the meeting took place and the nature of the discussion we had was entirely positive. At the same time, it is best to allow Mr. Trimble to speak for himself. He is well able to express his point of view, which he does frequently, and it would not be appropriate for me to attempt to represent his view in any matter.