

QUESTION NOS. 6 TO 9

DÁIL QUESTIONS addressed to the Taoiseach
by Deputy Mary Harney
for ORAL ANSWER on Wednesday, 5th June, 1996.

QUESTION NO: 6

To ask the Taoiseach if he will report on the consultations, if any, he has had with the British Prime Minister in the aftermath of the Northern Ireland elections on 30 May 1996.

- Mary Harney

QUESTION NO: 7

To ask the Taoiseach the composition of the Government team for the forthcoming all-party negotiations in Northern Ireland commencing on 10 June 1996.

Mary Harney

QUESTION NO: 8

To ask the Taoiseach whether he will attend the opening session of the all-party negotiations.

- Mary Harney

QUESTION NO: 9

To ask the Taoiseach if he will report on the discussions, if any, he has had with the parties in Northern Ireland since the elections on 30 May 1996.

- Mary Harney

REPLY.

I propose to take Questions 6, 7, 8, and 9 together.

There is ongoing, intensive contact, involving the Tánaiste and Government officials, with the British side. I maintain constant informal contact with the British Prime Minister relating to Northern Ireland and other matters.

The composition of the Irish Government's team for the negotiations on 10 June will be announced later this week.

Last week, on 28 May, I reported to the House on my most recent formal meetings with the SDLP and with the Alliance Party. I have maintained informal contact with both Parties since then.

As part of a process to keep in touch with the main strands of opinion, and pursuant to an arrangement made at our previous meeting, I had a further meeting with Mr. David Trimble, Leader of the UUP today. We had a useful and constructive exchange of views. I do not propose to comment on the detail of our discussions.

ENDS

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D7

Add Nos. 6 to 9 inclusive.

Miss Harney: Will the Taoiseach confirm if the role to be played by the former Senator, George Mitchell, has been agreed between the two Governments?

The Taoiseach: There is a number of matters currently under discussion between the Tánaiste, acting on behalf of the Irish Government, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, acting on behalf of the UK Government. These matters are being discussed in London as we speak. The issue of the chairmanship of the various parts of talks to commence on 10 June are among those being considered. Other matters are also being considered and discussed between the two Governments at this moment.

Miss Harney: Will the Taoiseach confirm if during his meeting with Mr. Trimble he was able to agree on a role for the former Senator, George Mitchell and if he was able to agree on the modalities for decommissioning?

The Taoiseach: My meeting with Mr. Trimble was not a negotiating one where I was seeking agreements from him or he was seeking agreements from me on any topics. It was a discussion where we reviewed the situation generally as I reviewed it generally in recent meetings I had with the Leader of the SDLP and the Leader of the Alliance Party.

Mr. B. Aherm: Following the Taoiseach's meeting with Mr. Trimble this morning, Mr. Trimble raised further difficulties about the role to be played by

the former Senator, George Mitchell as chairman or convenor of the talks process. Will the Taoiseach tell the House if he considers he persuaded Mr. Trimble or Mr. Trimble could be persuaded in that regard?

The Taoiseach: I would not care to get involved in commentary on private meetings of the kind the Deputy is inviting. The meeting I had with Mr. David Trimble was constructive and informative as were those I had with other party leaders recently in regard to this matter. The concerns expressed by Mr. Trimble, to which the Deputy made reference, were concerns expressed by Mr. Trimble prior to his meeting with me. They did not in any sense flow from any discussions he had with me. The issues on which agreement is sought are difficult in light of the divided nature of the community in Northern Ireland and the differing perceptions in Northern Ireland in regard to matters other people might regard as not as important as they may be seen to be in the light of the perceptions and the traditional divisions of view that exist in Northern Ireland.

Section E follows

DÁIL ÉIREANN

3.10 p.m.

5 June 1996

Ms Harney: Is the Taoiseach confident that the remaining areas of difference between the two Governments will be resolved before next Monday?

The Taoiseach: The two Governments have already agreed an enormous range of issues concerning the talks. We agreed in February that there should be a fixed date for those talks, something that had not been agreed previously and which had been the cause of great concern and frustration. Subsequently we agreed on very detailed and extensive ground rules for the talks. We had also previously agreed on a joint framework document which outlined a possible outcome for the talks which would be a useful working document as a contribution in the talks.

Some issues still remain to be settled and it is the wish of the two Governments to agree as many as possible of the remaining issues before the talks commence, but it is a fact that the purpose of the talks is to reach agreement on issues that are currently disagreed and therefore it is not necessarily a failing that everything that could possibly be agreed between the two Governments is not agreed by them in advance. However, as far as possible one should seek to agree everything possible in advance and that is what we are trying to do.

Mr. B. Ahern: Where stands the issue of decommissioning at this stage? Has there been agreement between the two Governments to put this back until September? What is the position?

The Taoiseach: The precise modalities and arrangements for carrying forward the terms of the communiqué of 28 February wherein the content and recommendations of the Mitchell Report must be dealt with in the talks is one of the matters currently in discussion between the Tánaiste on behalf of the Irish Government and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on behalf of the UK Government. These discussions are ongoing as we speak. As far as is logistically possible the Tánaiste is keeping me informed of progress on an hour to hour basis but the discussions are not yet concluded, to the best of my knowledge.

Ms Harney: Does the Taoiseach agree with comments made by Mr. Séamus Mallon that in the absence of an IRA cease-fire and therefore the exclusion of Sinn Féin from the all party talks, the SDLP would be more than capable of representing the nationalists of Northern Ireland at those talks?

The Taoiseach: I would not care to comment on a statement of that kind which relates to the views of a particular political party in regard to other political parties. It is best that I should not comment on what the Deputy has brought to my notice.

Ms Harney: I am surprised at the Taoiseach's comments.

Minister for Equality and Law Reform (Mr. Taylor): The Deputy is surprised?

Ms Harney: I said I was surprised at the Taoiseach's comments. Is the Taoiseach hopeful that there will be an IRA cease-fire to facilitate Sinn Féin's participation?

The Taoiseach: I am certainly anxious that there should be an IRA cease-fire. It would be of great importance and would be of major assistance to the success of the talks starting on 10 June. It is important to see these all party talks for what they are, the first opportunity for many years for all political parties to get around the same table, including those who have traditionally relied on physical force. This opportunity must be grasped now. It is not something about which there should be procrastination. Opportunities of this nature do not come easily. I told the Deputy previously that it was not easy to get agreement to a fixed date for all party talks. It was one of the most difficult tasks that any Government of this country has had to undertake but it was successfully undertaken. We now have a fixed date and decisions need to be made by others so all the parties will be able to participate according to the agreed rules on that date.

Mr. B. Ahern: An important reassurance was given by the Taoiseach's predecessor in the summer of 1994. Could the Taoiseach state whether the Government, like its predecessor, endorses the report of the New Ireland Forum? The Fianna Fáil - Labour Partnership Government in 1983 stated that its long term policy was to make possible the eventual achievement of a united Ireland by agreement and consent in the spirit of the New Ireland Forum. Could the Taoiseach say whether that remains the policy of the present Government?

The Taoiseach: The New Ireland Forum contains many important statements about the nature of the problem in Ireland. The report was presented a considerable number of years ago. It was at the time my predecessor referred to it the only report

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of its kind in existence. Since then a further report, the report of the forum for peace and reconciliation, has been prepared on these same topics. Many important insights are contained in the report of the New Ireland Forum. Paragraph 4.15 of the New Ireland Forum Report said:

The solution to both the historic problem and the current crisis of Northern Ireland and the continuing problems of relations between Britain and Ireland necessarily require new structures that will accommodate together two sets of legitimate rights, the right of Nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity and the right of Unionists to effective political symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life. So long as the legitimate rights of both Unionists and Nationalists are not accommodated together in new political structures acceptable to both, that situation will continue to give rise to conflict and instability. The starting point of genuine reconciliation and dialogue is mutual recognition and acceptance of the legitimate rights of both. The forum is convinced that dialogue which fully respects both traditions can overcome the fears and divisions of the past and create an atmosphere in which peace and stability can be achieved.

I am very glad to say that the possibility for that dialogue has now been created. The possibility of the dialogue sought in the New Ireland Forum Report has been created by the setting of a fixed date for all party talks to commence next week. It is, of course, the wish of the Government to see the coming together in unity of all the Irish people in their diverse traditions and their diverse national allegiances. That is something to be earnestly wished for but the focus now has to be on seeking an agreement based on consent between the different groups who have different points

DAIL EIREANN

3.20

5 June 1996

That statement, agreed by all of the parties in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation is one with which I agree and which informs this Government's approach to the all-party negotiations that are commencing next week. It is my hope that on that basis, as a result of an IRA ceasefire, we will be able to see all the parties taking their place so that that agenda that was agreed by all of the parties in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation can be pursued.

Mr. B. Ahern: I thank the Taoiseach for his detailed reply. The Taoiseach worked hard on the working group, and I have no difficulty with the final report of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Can I take it that the Taoiseach has no difficulty in agreeing that the long-term policy is to make possible the eventual achievement of a united Ireland by agreement and consent, in the spirit of the New Ireland Forum? I do not think that is contrary to what is in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

The Taoiseach: While I have quoted extensively from both documents, I do not have the originals here, and a discourse of this kind would probably require more time than is available to us at Question Time. I would regard the coming together of the Irish people in their diverse traditions and diverse allegiances as something earnestly to be wished for based on consent and through agreement.

At this juncture in our history the urgent matter is to get people around the table. We should be emphasising not the differences that may exist about ultimate goals but rather the unity of purpose that exists in regard to having a dialogue. The principle factor blocking a truly comprehensive dialogue at this time is the non-reinstatement to date by the IRA of their ceasefire.

Mr. B. Aherm: That is what we are all trying to achieve. My question was purely to try to assist in that.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I would advise Members that the House must proceed to deal with questions nominated with priority at 3.30 p.m.

Mr. M. McDowell: Would the Taoiseach agree with the proposition that any such balanced political accommodation in Northern Ireland would necessarily entail a different attitude to the relationship between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and that it cannot be the case that the Republic can in future be regarded simply as any other foreign State? Would the Taoiseach agree that the Unionist population in particular owe to the Nationalists a duty of regarding the Republic as having a special status just as, in the same way, were the Unionists at some future stage to be in the minority, the Nationalist people of Ireland would owe to the Unionists in Northern Ireland an obligation to regard Britain as not just some other foreign state?

The Taoiseach: I have referred to that already in my Finglas speech where I indicated a preference for an indicative time frame which might be shorter than that provided for in the legislation. That is a matter for the parties to discuss when they get together. It is not for me to lay down such matters.

Mr. R. Burke: Surely the time frame is affected by talk of leaving the question of decommissioning till September. Recognising the Taoiseach's reluctance to be forthcoming to the House in relation to confidential meetings, will he let us into a secret - has it even been agreed where the meeting will take place on Monday? If it has been agreed, will the Taoiseach tell the House?

The Taoiseach: All these matters will be made known when the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State have concluded their discussions and brought to the attention of all who need to know as soon as they are agreed.

Mr. R. Burke: Does that come under Cabinet confidentiality?

Section G follows