



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW WITH BERTIE AHERN**

November 8, 2010  
Dublin, Ireland

**Interviewers**

James Sterling Young, chair  
Russell Riley

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TRANSCRIPT

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**Young:** This is an interview with Bertie Ahern in Dublin, on November the 8th.

**Ahern:** The Kennedy family and everything to do with the Kennedys, from the time I was a small boy, has been a great fascination for me. Like most Irish people, I have been a follower and admirer and supporter of the Kennedys from the time I was very small.

I was in primary school during the 1960 Presidential campaign. Admiration for the Kennedys, the Irishness of the Kennedys, and then all that happened to John F. [Kennedy], winning the Presidency against [Richard M.] Nixon, were things we were taught in school and that our teachers spoke about, trying to educate us into foreign policy. We ignored Britain in those days and they didn't teach us about it in school. In fact, we didn't mention Britain in school. It was far more convenient as most of my teachers were nationalists, so my knowledge of the world started with the knowledge that there was a Pope and there were the Kennedys. That was in the late '50s and early '60s.

I was born and reared here. I went to school just across the bridge, at Saint Patrick's, and I lived just 100 yards up the road from there. I watched John F. coming here in June of '63, from the top of the railings up the road, and I was in secondary school when Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] was assassinated in the '68 campaign. Because it was summertime and at the end of an exam, I remember well a Christian brother coming into the classroom to tell us that Bobby had been assassinated. And then the whole story moved on to Teddy and the ups and downs of Teddy. So all during the '60s, I had a big awareness of that, before I ever got into politics.

I started being active in politics at the very end of the '60s, as a student. I went to college part-time, at night, but I was very involved in student union politics with my party in school. I joined the party 40 years ago. From that time, the Kennedys were special to my party and to Ireland, and there were a lot of people in the party who had actually met John F., Teddy, and Bobby. Just for the historical record, my father worked in the Vincentian Order in All Hallows College up the road. It's a college that was a seminary for priests "for the foreign missions," as they used to say, but not so much now—All Hallows didn't do the missionary work. They didn't do Africa. They did do all over America, Virginia and Boston, Honolulu and Newfoundland. And John F. Kennedy, before he was President, came there.

We had photographs at home of John F. coming to All Hallows, where my father worked for 50 years. My father was form manager then. It was kind of special that John F. Kennedy had been here. Teddy remained a very good supporter of All Hallows College. Later I attended many functions in the United States at which All Hallows was trying to raise money, and Teddy always attended. Whenever there was a reception in the Irish Embassy or somewhere else, Teddy would

make sure he got there. How he got back from the Senate or wherever, I was always fascinated when he got there. That he was a big supporter of the Vincentian Order and the college, and a deeply religious man, I knew that from the Vincentians. I knew he was a good supporter.

I was elected to Parliament in '77 and met Teddy for the first time in '83 on an all party visit to Washington. I was on the Northern Ireland Committee of the party from the start. My father was a Republican, an active IRA [Irish Republican Army] man. I was the youngest of the family. My father an active service IRA man as a young man. We grew up a very Republican household, but my father sided with Dev's [Eamon de Valera] side in the Civil War. My father supported Fianna Fáil, but I think it's fair to say he retained a healthy respect for the Republican cause. He was anti-British to the day he died, and the people I finally did business with, none of them would have been his friends. *[laughter]* My father was a hardliner but he had great regard for the Kennedys, was a huge supporter of them. So I grew up in a household that was very Kennedys-oriented.

When I met Teddy in '83, my parents would have been very happy, as I was. Without exception, I'd say I met Teddy every year from 1983 on, because I was on parliamentary committees and I was in government most of the time. I was Government Chief Whip, and then I was spokesman on labor, and I was vice president of the party from 1983, so for a quarter-of-a-century an office holder of the party. I was president for ten years, so between president and vice president I was back and forth all the time, and that gave me the key to the door, to be able to get in to see people in Capitol Hill. So although I was quite young, I got to know Teddy, Chris Dodd and Jean [Kennedy Smith] and all of the Kennedy family quite well. And then I got involved in the Special Olympics.

**Young:** So there was Eunice [Kennedy Shriver], too.

**Ahern:** I was involved with Eunice, working with her and her son, getting the Special Olympics to Ireland, winning the bid for Ireland. I spent over ten years involved with the Kennedys, so I was involved with them through that end of it as well. That's just a quick run-through, and I suppose we're starting at the back, then. When I was leaving office in May of 2008 I think, subject to correction, that that was probably Teddy's last speech, his last big occasion. We had a big function at the Kennedy Library held in my honor, and all the family were there, and we were giving a gift from the Irish State towards the Kennedy Library.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** Teddy was there. I knew that day Teddy was not well, because I had never seen him before deliver a speech where he didn't feel confident taking his eye off it. At the end of that speech—if you watch the video, as I have a good few times—he actually held the podium. If you watch, in all his other speeches, he never held the podium. Even with his bad back, he was waving his hands and that. I was only just home a few days later when he got ill. I'm not sure what the date was, but I remember that day, I felt it was special. I had been in his office loads of times but my daughters and their two husbands and my family had never been. He brought us back to his office and he gave them a full rundown on all his photographs and the memorabilia and the Irish stories, and they were absolutely fascinated. I was delighted for that, but so sad that he got ill just a few days later.

I know you've been talking to Albert [Reynolds], you've been talking to John [Hume]. A lot of people I think took an interest in the Irish peace process, in and out, but very few people took a passionate interest in it from start to finish. Teddy was in early on. I spoke to him about that; he had an interest before that. Teddy was following the Irish question from the very start of the troubles, from 1968. I spoke to him at length a number of times, and he was able to recall vividly the 5th of October, 1968, when the civil rights movement was attacked. He recalled when Sam Devenny was killed by the B-Specials.

And I talk about conversations that I had with him in the '80s and the '90s and the noughties. He was following what was happening from the mid-'60s on. You know, the common practice now is that the problems started in 1968, with the Civil Rights Movement. From the time the IRA stopped the previous campaign, the '56 to '62 campaign—after that, from '62, '63, '64 it was quiet enough, and then the Loyalists in the north started the trouble and it got quite hostile. The reason the Civil Rights Movement started in '68 was that the administration was totally anti-Catholic, anti-human rights, anti-civil rights. And Teddy was very aware of those things. In my conversations with him, and not one but several, he was taking a close watch in Ireland before the Civil Rights Movement, from '66 on, when the Loyalists were causing trouble. I know that from Chris Dodd as well, because Chris was always talking to him about these things in later years.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** So I think from the time when he must have been fighting the campaign in '68, he was taking an interest in Ireland. I recently talked to Jean when she was over here, and Jean would readily admit that the Kennedys were always taking an interest in Ireland. Teddy was taking an interest in the Civil Rights Movement that was going on in Paris in '68, and what was going on in America in '68, and in Ireland in '68. He was very aware of that. Of course the trouble started, and then there's the bit that everybody knows, then the [Four] Horsemen started making the statements. He was one of them, and [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan and the boys. Those were the statements that started from '72 to '73 on, but Teddy definitely predated that.

**Young:** The Four Horsemen, am I right in thinking that that was the opening effort on the American side, to try to turn Irish-American opinion toward the peace process, or at least away from supporting an IRA by arms and funds, from supporting violence?

**Ahern:** Yes. That's the second bit, away from violence and away from funding the various organizations.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** They started using St. Patrick's Day, when there was a world platform, to make comprehensive statements that at that stage were fed into by John Hume and the Irish government. To be frank, they were fairly hopeless in their efforts. It wasn't working. I was going to the meetings in colleges in the '70s from my party, and young people were not listening. They were making those statements on Patrick's Day, but then on the ground, the fundraising was going on. The Irish government, in my view, was protesting too much on one side. It was, "The IRA are bad, the IRA are terrible, the IRA are causing the problem." But the message that

the American people were getting was that a lot of these guys were being killed, there were a lot of them giving up their lives.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** They were fighting the empire, it was that. My party position here was opposed to the violence, opposed to the IRA, and even my father, after the early years, would have been opposed, because he saw the IRA were doing indiscriminate sectarian things and killing innocent people. You know, if they hadn't been concentrating their effort on fighting the British Army, I think people would have all been a bit more sympathetic, but it was the ordinary people suffering. But the message was not getting to the United States.

**Young:** When do you think the message got through?

**Ahern:** Not for a long time. Not, I think, until the peace process really started. The peace process didn't really start until about '87, so it was a long period. Now, I'm not saying it was a useless exercise, making the speeches on St. Patrick's Day and trying to keep a focus on it, but the Irish government's message and trying to drive Americans away from supporting the campaign, that was not working. We know that because the money was coming in. In fairness, for the Irish government, my party and other parties, they had to keep up the relentless campaign of fighting against the IRA, but the British government never really gave them the grounds to fight with, during the Maggie [Margaret] Thatcher period, the hunger strike. So Irish public support was all the time ambivalent in the U.S.

What Teddy and the Four Horsemen did was they kept the Irish message in the world news, that there had to be a peaceful way some day of actually doing this, and there were many efforts. There were the Sunningdale talks in 1974. Teddy was very supportive in trying to bolster up support for that, but of course it collapsed in no time, because the British government didn't give support. Teddy was very strong on that and while he kept good relations with the British government, he was one of the ones able continually to criticize them; there are endless amounts of speeches where he set that down. Then later on, when Garret FitzGerald did his best to get another section of the peace process going, Maggie Thatcher came over here and said the "out, out, out" speech. We had set out conditions, and then she came out and she read through each of the conditions and said, "Out, out, out." That was just hugely unhelpful and it was humiliating against the Irish Prime Minister. Even though he was not of my party, we were incensed by the way he was treated, as anyone would be about their Prime Minister. That was in and around '85.

So in all of that period, the effort was to support constitutional nationalism, to try to keep democracy in the frontline, stop Noraid collecting huge money in the United States, and get people to see some sense and stop violence. There was a ceasefire in 1972. It broke down in a place called Lenadoon. Then in August of '72, there was the invasion of the Bogside. William Whitelaw was Secretary of State and again, that failed. In '73, there were the talks that led to Sunningdale in '74; that collapsed, and the aftermath of that was the Dublin bombings, the biggest things that happened south of the border. It just continued, and then into the '80s.

Teddy stuck with it through all that period and supported John Hume, supported the Irish government, but there were no real signs of getting anywhere. Each time a huge amount of effort

went into it, but it collapsed again. I was leader of the City Council in '85, was Lord Mayor of Dublin in '86, and was made Minister in '87. I remember Teddy's advice after the Enniskillen bombing. It was just the time of the year when there's a remembrance Sunday, and the IRA put a bomb near the remembrance memorial, Enniskillen, and blew up a whole lot of people. It was a terrible atrocity.

I remember talking to Teddy after that. I was over in the States, my first time there as Minister of Labor, so it had to be before Christmas '87, just after the bombing. He was saying, "Listen, with these things, you just have to keep at them, you have to keep new initiatives, keep trying the new things." It was in the following year, 1988, that Charlie Haughey started the involvement with my party secretly, and with the IRA through Father Alex Reid, a Redemptorist priest.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** And we started these secret meetings. I wasn't at those early meetings. My namesake, Dermot Ahern, who is still Minister for Justice, he was, and Teddy was aware of those. Teddy knew what we were at in the '88, '89 period.

**Young:** Those were the times when there was dialogue with the IRA, between Reid and Gerry Adams and others.

**Ahern:** Yes. And the IRA.

**Young:** So those were secret.

**Ahern:** They were secret. They were held in the Redemptorist House in the center of Belfast.

**Riley:** Where did Teddy get his knowledge of this?

**Ahern:** From Irish Government Ministers.

**Riley:** I see.

**Ahern:** Yes. And he knew what we were at. They went on from '88. Again, they didn't achieve much. They were going on and Albert Reynolds then took it up from Charlie Haughey. When Charlie Haughey left in '92, Albert Reynolds took it up again.

A few significant things happened. It wasn't that the IRA or the British Army were getting tired, but the deeds got more horrendous all the time and more people were getting killed. And then there was this targeting. The IRA was targeting the Loyalists, the Loyalists were targeting the IRA, and there were a few terrible IRA bombings. They put a bomb in a butcher's shop and the bombing team—I don't know what. It was a botched attempt, it blew up all the customers and it was terrible. There were just terrible atrocities. There was the Fermanagh killing in '87, up to '92. People started to say, "Where is this getting us? Everyone's killing everybody but there's no political progress being made."

Inter-party talks had started in '91, '92 again and these were official talks. Teddy was supportive of those, Irish America was rolling in behind those, and I think around that time we started

getting a bit of traction. I don't know whether it was American people getting fed up that this was a long-playing record, or I would think more so, every time they saw that there were just more people being killed, and it just got more horrendous.

At that time I was Minister of Finance and was going to Washington a lot. I was on the World Bank and on the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. That's what brought me to Washington and I was meeting the politicians more, I was on Capitol Hill a lot. All the work of Tip O'Neill and Ted and all the others, I think people were just getting tired of this stuff. You could see it when you were on your visits.

Then when Albert came in and said he made this his number one aim, he built on Charlie's work very quickly. There were a number of big things that happened then. The fact that Jean was here, that gave a great fill-up to the place. To be frank, Jean was a breath of fresh air. We've had many good and great Ambassadors, many of them here for different reasons, and all of them who worked hard.

**Young:** Ted said, about many of the Ambassadors, they were interested in two things; horses and their relationship with their President. That was it. *[laughter]*

**Ahern:** Well, I don't want to say anything wrong, but Jean was different. Jean was political, she understood. She had direct links into the government, she had direct links back home. She took her own soundings, she made political decisions.

**Young:** And she was not a politician by profession.

**Ahern:** No, but she had the Kennedy instincts and she was very political. She was extraordinary. These were tricky times. I'm sure you've been through it with Albert, but in that '92/'93 period, we were trying to get the Downing Street declaration done, first of all. Archbishop [Robin] Eames was helping us and we were beginning to get into the start of talking to the other side.

While the troubles had been going on since the '60s, there was very little dialogue with the Unionist or Loyalist people. Very little, considering that we were now 25, 26 years into the trouble. And of course there were other things, then. There was the removal of the ban, the IRA's representatives, Sinn Féin, being able to speak in the media. There was the famous passports issue, where Jean made the call to convince [William J.] Clinton to allow Adams and some of the others into the country, and to start a dialogue for the first time between Sinn Féin and IRA people and the people in the States. Rather it had always been the other way along, that the Noraid people, [Martin] Galvin and these guys, were coming over here. That was a big change.

**Young:** How important do you think the granting of the Adams visa was?

**Ahern:** Oh, it was very important. You see, it was about respectability, it was about recognizing. It was about being able to say, "The world aren't all against us, we're not cocooned into this box where no one will listen to us." The visa thing went down well in the Republican strongholds in Ireland and in America.

**Young:** Yes. It didn't go down well with the British.

**Ahern:** The British went mad. The consistency of how the British were unhelpful, all the way from the start.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** About the only thing useful the British did, before [Anthony] Blair's time, was bringing the army in to help the nationalists at the start; in August of '69, they brought the British Army in. It's funny, you look back into history, over 40 years ago now, but the British Army came in to help, to save the nationalists from being killed by RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] and the B-Specials, and the UDR [Ulster Defense Regiment] later on. But of course, the British Army quickly then was taken over by the administration and became hostile to nationalist people, though that should have been handled differently by the Republicans, as well.

From '92, '93, '94, Jean was very important. Jean's relationship with Teddy, Teddy being able to call some shots, Clinton liking the Kennedys, that was all very important. And of course, we thought we were doing great then, in August of 1994. We got the ceasefire and then political problems happened here. Albert was gone in no time. We lost power without an election, which is some trick, but anyway we managed to do it. Albert went.

I came in, in December of '94, as leader of Fianna Fáil. I immediately followed on the policy of talking to Adams. I think probably the first meeting I had, even before we had our offices because we were out overnight, was I started dealing with Adams and the others to keep things going. The new government coming in was supportive of the peace process, but they just hadn't been there through all the difficult years. They just weren't able to get a handle on it, and the British quickly got into ascendancy again.

From having the ceasefire in August of '94, by spring of '95, we were into this, "Well, is the ceasefire permanent? If it's permanent, how permanent is it? And will we see the arms handed over?" So within six months it was on the rocks. We worked and were supportive of the government and Albert had set up this peace and reconciliation group, and I then took that forward and we had meetings every week. But the government was just not watching it closely enough and by the time we got to the end of '95, the whole thing broke down again.

The bombing campaign started again, the killing, with the huge bombs at Canary Wharf and that. So I was in opposition at this stage. I remember well talking to Teddy a number of times. First of all, I would tell him, "It is going downhill," and then I'd tell him, "It has gone downhill." At the time when it broke down on a Friday night in January of '96, I remember talking to Teddy at weekends on the phone, telling him what was going on, keeping in touch with him, giving notice of the opposition. I was over to America before Paddy's Day in '96, and trying to work it out again.

Right through '96, I was talking to Sinn Féin unofficially. I wasn't talking to the IRA, but I certainly had feelers out into the IRA, various people. Albert had built up some contacts and I developed those and we moved them on. It became clear to us as we went into 1997 that if we put in a big effort again, if we could get the British to change a bit of the attitude and could get Irish America behind us, we could get the ceasefire back on. In the '97 campaign one of the huge strong points for us was that I was articulating how we could get the ceasefire back on track, and



how we could get a coalition of nationalist Ireland, America, and the British government behind us. I had built up a relationship on that position with Blair, who took a very different attitude to his predecessors.

**Young:** Now, you became Taoiseach in '97. And Blair became Prime Minister.

**Ahern:** Just a few weeks before me. We had had meetings in Dublin and London prior to our elections.

**Young:** And Jean was still here.

**Ahern:** We were working in cahoots, in opposition; we were talking to the people. Even during the campaign, there were people who had been killed. Sometimes now, people think that things weren't that bad after '97. The '94 ceasefire was great but it had totally disintegrated. There were some terrible killings during the election campaign in '97, and I was saying, "Well, how would Blair handle this?" I remember one day during the campaign, two police officers were gunned down. You know, every time there was a killing, it made it harder for him to be able to do anything. But anyway, we had a plan. First of all, both of us had to get elected, and if we got elected, he would come to Belfast. He would set down the terms that he was prepared to do to get talks going, and he'd make one big effort. But if violence didn't stop, he was out and we could do nothing. So we had to come in very strongly on that.

I came in, I got elected and made the same kinds of speeches, that we have to get movement on it, and then the plan was to try and get the ceasefire back on track. I kept Teddy informed. Teddy knew exactly what I was doing before I got in and when I got in. We got the ceasefire quickly. I came in in June sometime, we got the ceasefire back by the end of July, and it has never broken down since. There were various stages to it.

**Young:** What could he do, though? I mean, you kept him informed. Did he do anything?

**Ahern:** He built up a good relationship with the Brits. In fairness to Teddy, he always had good relations with the Brits in one form or another. He had always built contacts.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** So even when Thatcher was there and we hated the sight of her, because we could never get anywhere under Thatcher, Teddy always had contacts and would make tough statements. But as he was good at it, he could manage to keep all the irons in the fire. That was important for us. Once the Blair team came in they started listening to him far better, there was no doubt about it. And the information supply I was getting back in contacts with Teddy was superb. Teddy was on my mobile when I was Taoiseach. If I was able to say, "Listen, this is what's wrong, they're not listening," he would be able to feed that into the Brits, in Washington. I think it was very hard up to '93 or '94, getting anywhere on that, but it did improve. It improved under [John] Major and then massively under Blair.

**Young:** Was Peter Jay Ambassador to the U.S. at any of this time?

**Ahern:** No, he was a good bit earlier. I was wondering who was Ambassador at that time over there, but Teddy knew all the guys. Teddy was clever enough that he went to all the receptions and he called in, so he was—

**Young:** He had a good ear.

**Ahern:** He knew them all. Now, this is the important part. In September of '97, we started the multi-party talks. These were the talks chaired by George Mitchell, God love him, trying to make progress, and we had the Mitchell Principles, which everybody kind of signed up to but some kept breaking, and continued to break for a good while after that. From the beginning of September, '97, the talks started and poor George Mitchell was hanging around for four weeks before they talked to the chair. The chair wouldn't recognize the Unionists and the Loyalists, but at least we got everybody around the table. This was the plan Blair and I had, that we would get everybody into one room, no matter how hard it would be.

**Young:** And who was everybody? This was the first major effort to get the parties in North Ireland together.

**Ahern:** Yes. This is the first time these guys looked at each other.

**Young:** At the table and talking.

**Ahern:** Yes. There was an effort made in Sunningdale in '74, but there were only a few of the parties involved. This was the first time since then that everybody came in, once they signed up to the Mitchell Principles, and that was kind of iffy.

Gary McMichael's party, UDP [Ulster Democratic Party], ultimately they disintegrated, but we brought them all in; David Ervine's PUP [Progressive Unionist Party]. In these talks, everybody was in. On the nationalist side, John Hume's party, SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party], Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, the UUP [Ulster Unionist Party], which was David Trimble, the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party], which was [Ian] Paisley, who came in and went out, but was there at the start, and PUP, which was David Ervine, who has since died, and UDP, Gary McMichael, the Women's Coalition, Monica McWilliams. The Alliance Party, which had three or four different leaders, and the UK Unionists, with Conor Cruise O'Brien and a few others. So we got them all into one place, and the Irish government and the British government.

**Young:** Yes. [*laughter*]

**Ahern:** So it was a daily headache. The first four weeks were incredible, because they wouldn't talk to the chair. Mitchell was there and they wouldn't look at each other and they talked to the roof and talked to the floor and scowled at each other. It was funny. But you know, every week passed into October, into November.

**Young:** Nobody walked out?

**Ahern:** Yes, they walked out and they walked in, and then sometimes we had to suspend them. It was news when you'd suspend them and bring them back in. On it went and we got to Christmas. We made a mistake at Christmas, in my view, in that we adjourned too early. By keeping them

all politically talking, it had filled the vacuum, but everybody was probably tired and we adjourned for the Christmas break, I think about the 14th of December.

It would have been normal anywhere else, but in Northern Ireland, it wasn't. As soon as the talks broke for Christmas they started killing each other again, including one of the famous prisoners in prison, on St. Stephen's Day or the day after. He was one of the leaders of the Loyalist prisoners, and some of the Nationalist guys somehow got the arms and killed him in prison. And of course that created huge tensions again. So instead of adjourning for Christmas and just coming back after Christmas to get it all going again, we were nearly back at the start, trying to pick up the pieces. There were various killings. We had to suspend people because of killings linked to the IRA. Sinn Féin was suspended. Because of killings linked to Loyalists, the UDP, people were suspended, and it was really rough.

All through that period, I kept in touch with Teddy. We spoke to each other not every day, but certainly a few times a week. He would make useful statements about staying at it, and of course Clinton was becoming more and more important. I was asking Teddy all the time to try and keep Clinton interested and get him to be supportive and keep an eye on the Brits. We were deeply suspicious, and still are to this day, of the Brits. We were very suspicious of what games they might get up to. We trusted Blair but worried about the MI-5 and MI-6. We were worried about all the games that can go on in the British system.

**Young:** Blair was pretty straight.

**Ahern:** Blair never crossed us once. But the British system is very complex. From my long experience of dealing with the Brits, MI-5 and MI-6 seem to be independent of everybody, and certainly independent of the British Prime Minister. It's a funny security setup. Nobody knows what they spend, nobody seems to know who works for them, and nobody knows what they do. They're a good secret service if you're British, but not if you're Irish.

**Riley:** And this was a hard time to get Clinton's attention in December of '95, because of government stuff, drastic stuff.

**Ahern:** It was. There were all the other problems. So really, the run-in to the talks then started in February of '98.

**Young:** They got going again.

**Ahern:** At least we were talking again. Meetings were on Saturdays, Sundays, nighttime, people would come down here to see me, I was going up; we were getting places. And then of course, Paddy's Day '98 was hugely important, because it was coming just weeks before the final push-in. I and a lot of others spent quite a lot of time in Washington at that stage, briefing everybody, and Clinton gave us a lot of time that St. Patrick's Day. I spent a lot of time with Teddy, had several meetings with him and with Chris Dodd. I remember I went to meet Patrick Leahy. I met all them once, but I spent a lot of time briefing everybody. I met the Friends of Ireland, Jim Walsh and Richard Neal, and all of these guys were very helpful at the time.

I did a huge press conference with Teddy, which was I'm sure well on record, and a massive amount of journalists turned up. Teddy was great, not a note in his hand. I remember it well. He

went back through the troubles, the various efforts that were made, through the various years and that this was a huge effort, it was important. In true Teddy form, he had gotten all the staffers to let it be known that this was a big press conference. Everyone on Capitol Hill turned up. It was Paddy's Day and it got huge coverage in England as well as everywhere, because everyone was into it, all the journalists. Hundreds of journalists came here for Good Friday, for the talks, so this was the big story. Then we were back into the last three weeks.

**Young:** Were you actually at the Mitchell meetings?

**Ahern:** We attended as necessary. Tony Blair used to come when it was something really big, and whenever we were meeting the parties, separately. He'd always come to those sessions. We used to meet for maybe two days every few weeks, and then he'd come and meet us. What happened the last few weeks in the final run-in was, like all of these things, is well documented. George Mitchell wrote a fairly accurate book about it in 1998.

We were trying to get the last pieces through and like all these things, everything was left to the end and everyone was pushing everything out. There were endless arguments about what the format was and nobody was happy. But Blair and I were in London for nearly a week. The European Asian Conference was on for four days, I think. We were meeting in the morning, lunchtime, nighttime on the Irish question, trying to make progress back and forward, making concessions. I made some tough speeches about not making too many concessions because I had to talk the game up, but we were making some. And of course, I finally had to make the call on changing Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. I had talked that through with Teddy.

**Young:** That's interesting.

**Ahern:** Teddy knew that was going to be my big card, and of course he didn't say it until I played it, but he knew what I was going to do.

**Young:** These were the provisions of the Constitution that claimed jurisdiction over all the island.

**Ahern:** Exactly.

**Young:** And that was changed to what?

**Ahern:** That Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom, and with the good wishes of the British government. But it would only change by a vote of the people in the north. So if the people in the north voted for a Constitution change, it would happen, but no longer would the Irish government claim jurisdiction over it. The *quid pro quo* was we the British were removing their hold over Northern Ireland and exacting the future changes would be with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

**Young:** That's right.

**Ahern:** So when we were pulling back, they were pulling back, but we had to make the constitutional change. I had to bring that to the people.

**Young:** Was that dicey?

**Ahern:** It was, in the negotiations. Now as it happened, because we got a good deal, the Irish people voted 95 to five percent, but at the time we were negotiating, it wasn't clear how it would work out. Anything could have happened. So you know, we got to that last week and came back to the north, and Blair and I were in the north all week. Talks started on Palm Sunday and went all the way through to 5:00 on Good Friday, when they ended up and we finally got agreement.

I did a press conference with Tony Blair after the final session, when the talks were adjourned permanently, because that was the end by Mitchell. I did the press conference and everyone was congratulating everyone, but my mother had just died, so I wanted to go back to Dublin quickly because I hadn't seen my family. I had left them at the gravesite and hadn't seen them since. I came back to Dublin. I'd only arrived back to this house and the President, Mary McAleese, rang me and the next person to ring me was Ted Kennedy. I had a long chat with Ted, and he was preparing his statement to come out on American TV.

I remember the following day, Kofi Annan rang and I was talking to Teddy again, because we then had to go into a campaign here to get the agreement passed, and for me to change the election. Having spent weeks getting the Good Friday Agreement through and wrapped up on the 10th of April, I had to go straight into a national campaign for the 22nd of May, to get the articles changed in the Constitution. So I went straight back into another campaign, and the first break wasn't until the 24th of May, through all of that time. Then we had to start the implementation of the agreement.

**Young:** That was just as difficult, wasn't it?

**Ahern:** And bit by bit that went on. The big things were the decommissioning of arms, trying to get a power-sharing executive to work, setting up an executive in the north, getting Stormont to meet. Then there was Stormontgate, when a box of items was found and the Brits said this was some big thing, and the whole thing collapsed. They had the television cameras ready to get all the RUC coming in with machine guns, to find this box of nothing. Nobody was ever prosecuted in it, you know. These were the kinds of games that they play.

And of course the IRA was up to games as well. This was the stuff that went on all the way from 1999 up until 2007, and it was up, down, up, down each time, but with less violence. Each time was getting more peaceful, nobody had been killed, and odd little—like now, when there's an odd little thing. We'll probably never see the day where there's not something. As long as there's not a united Ireland, there will be some people who would be taking the law into their own hands, or a lot of criminals who try to use it as a reason.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** That's the way it is now. But we had all that period of trying to convince Adams to do another bit. Adams was looking for another bit; back and forth, back and forth. And that period was as important as the other. Through all of that, Teddy was a huge show of strength, I'll tell you. There were periods where the IRA and Sinn Féin tried to get out of some of the responsibilities, and Teddy went on a limb against the IRA, against Adams, saying implement the agreement.

He and John McCain made really tough speeches. When I went over, both Teddy and John McCain did press conferences with me, separately, but they said the same thing. At the big Ireland funds dinner John McCain lashed Sinn Féin out of it, at a public function of a thousand people. He did that backing up Teddy, because Teddy was the one who was ostracized. Teddy was the one who came out, and as he did in the '60s, he was sticking to the traditional nationalist, Irish government lines, the SDLP lines. He never changed in any of that, and that's why it was so important that he was the one that was representing the United States in 2007, when Blair and I and all the leaders were there. He was the one who didn't just chip in with the weather. He was there all along. And even near the end, when someone had to speak that bitter word, Teddy was there doing that. He lashed Sinn Féin out, lashed out himself, and that was not easy, because at that time Adams was becoming a bit of a world figure.

**Young:** That's right.

**Ahern:** And seen as a charismatic leader, but he was still trying to play the ballot box in one and not end the IRA. I think Teddy exposed that. It was Teddy who got the White House to invite those sisters, whose brother was killed by the IRA.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** There was a row about whether they should be there or not. Sinn Féin did everything not to have them there. It was Teddy who made sure they were there, and I know that because he was keeping me informed.

**Young:** I think George [Walker] Bush was willing to work with Teddy on this, and I think he followed Teddy's lead. Is that your impression?

**Ahern:** Absolutely.

**Young:** To intervene now and do this and do that.

**Ahern:** Absolutely. There were a few occasions when George Bush did not take the advice of his own people and took Teddy's advice. When we wanted to get some things brought to attention, we went to Teddy to try and get them. George Bush's natural instinct was to say that the Sinners [Sinn Féin] were terrorists who could never be changed. That was his view and we permanently were convincing him, "Listen, whether we're going to win or not, at least there's a game on here; let us try and finish it through." [Richard] Cheney and [Donald] Rumsfeld and Condoleezza [Rice] didn't believe any of this, in my view. I met George Bush I think fourteen times, more than any European leader ever did. I sat there in the Oval Office several times, and Rumsfeld and Cheney, and particularly Condoleezza, did not believe this stuff.

**Young:** Did not believe?

**Ahern:** Did not believe our side. I don't know what people say or don't say, but she was the hardliner. She was calling the shots. The other two would usually listen.

**Young:** Well, Cheney was in the room, too, wasn't he? Hardliners outdoing hardliners.

**Ahern:** Yes, but the person who was calling the shots, I always thought it was her. She might have smiled and looked well, but she was tough on the issues.

**Young:** No, I think it does bear noting that though Teddy and President Bush were far apart on many issues of foreign policy, this was one in which the President was willing to acknowledge Ted's lead and history in it, and was willing to step in. Ted talked to me about this. He said, "I think he will do it. He said, 'If any time, Teddy, you need me to help, you just call me, and I'll do it.'" So that's very interesting.

**Ahern:** When we had those St. Patrick's Day dinners and lunches, Teddy was always there at the top table at those lunches. It was every year, and the President always came to those lunches, never once missed. Clinton never missed but neither did George Bush, to his credit. Teddy was always there and would always be the life and soul at the lunch. The President would acknowledge him publicly. There were a number of times, particularly when things went wrong, when the inclination of the administration was to say, "Oh, get those guys out of here, we don't want to talk to these fellas." With Teddy's help, we kept the thing onboard.

I remember at the EU [European Union] presidency, I was President in office in 2004 and I defer to the dealings with the President at that stage, because we had the American EU Summit here. That was a difficult period in the peace process, because the Sinners wouldn't get on with the arms decommissioning, and I was tied up with the European brief. I was trying to keep everything going. I think Bush said, "These guys are just heavy weather. We're a few years out from 9-11, do we really have to be listening to these guys?" Teddy was very helpful in that to say, "Listen, patience is a virtue. The Irish problem has gone on a long time, so stick with it."

**Young:** Nowadays, Northern Ireland doesn't need the kind of interventions that it once needed from the United States, does it?

**Ahern:** No. Since 2007, the administration in the north is running well. The institutions we set up, with the regular meetings between the north/south administrative council, Ministers are meeting, there's dialogue between the Prime Ministers. And actually, even though it's only three years on, the meetings are almost going unnoticed now, which is the way it should be.

**Young:** Not making news.

**Ahern:** Not making news, which is a good way. They're talking about the everyday issues or whatever. Now there still is a group in the north, but they shouldn't even be getting the publicity they're getting. They have the capacity to cause trouble, there's no doubt about it, and the capacity to kill people, but it's small and they shouldn't be getting too much attention. Most of it is built around criminality, everybody agrees on that. They just don't want to see Northern Ireland be successful, but they're a small group. Unfortunately, there were news instances. When they do something it gets a lot of publicity. If something happened in Dublin, then it wouldn't get anything, but there are more people killed in Dublin now than in Northern Ireland from crime.

**Young:** Paisley, Sr. was reconciled in the end. I happened to be in Ireland the day the decommissioning was announced. The *Irish Times* said, "The war is over." I just wondered how—Paisley was a fighter.

**Ahern:** Paisley was a fighter and was tough. He fought the line for his people; he got the biggest vote of any politician in Europe, for several European elections. I literally spent years trying to get on the inside of him. I think I managed to get friendly with his wife before I got friendly with him, and his son. But he always said to me, when he believed that the process was working, when he believed that the deed was done, he would actually deliver. He stopped and he started ten times, but in the end he stuck to his word. When he and I made the deal and he'd come out here and then he finally shook hands with me after years of not shaking hands, of nonsense, he went with it.

I knew from 1998 when he didn't go with the deal, that ultimately to get it really to work, we had to have Paisley on side. I didn't know in 1998 that his party would turn out to be the bigger and stronger party, but I did know that we had to get him on side. Ultimately, he was too big a character to leave out of the equation. He's ended up a good friend; he's been down to visit me several times. His wife and his son and himself, they've been down and they've been to my constituency and I've been up to his. So having been the big enemy for all my life—

**Young:** So it really is working.

**Ahern:** Oh, it is, there's no doubt about it, and it's working really well.

I have to say, there is no question about Teddy Kennedy, from start to finish. The start, I think was back in the '60s, I suppose, when he had that interest in what was going on. I suppose it was linked into the Civil Rights Movement, but he was very conscious about it. Then, to the John Hume, Irish government's period, with Jack Lynch and all of those, into the '70s, right up to the last day when I was addressing Congress, when I was able to acknowledge him on the floor for his contribution. He was a really powerful figure in Irish-American politics and we were lucky that he was there throughout the whole time.

**Young:** And that he rarely claimed credit for anything.

**Ahern:** Even in his own book, he doesn't. There were a whole of meetings and references but that, he didn't bother with.

**Young:** It was what he stood for that he wanted to get across in the book, I think.

**Ahern:** Yes, I think so. Even when he came here, apart from all the Northern issue, he was always on to us. And he had so many good staffers.

**Young:** Yes.

**Ahern:** He always let us link into his people on education and people on health. That was good to hear, that we'd be piggy-backing on these issues. We regularly used them to get information on cancer and various things on education. He attracted the best staffers because he was always doing more legislation than anyone else.

**Young:** He sure did.



**Ahern:** He also let us contact those people and it was very useful from an Irish point of view. So while the peace process was the big thing from my perspective, he was very helpful to Ireland. And he came back. Even when I was Taoiseach, I had some great sing-songs and nights until, I won't tell you what time in the morning, with Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] and himself and some of my Ministers, in government buildings, singing old Irish songs, and with my friends from the Vincentians, that I did in America. He was a good man, I'll tell you.

**Riley:** You got him to sing some on tape, didn't you?

**Young:** Yes. He told me about an event. I think maybe it was after he won his first election as Senator, when the election was clearly his. His brother Bob, and Jack who was President, for the rally at the end of the election instead of talking to the crowd—this was in South Boston, where the Irish communities are—they got up on the roof of the delicatessen and sang, the three brothers. So I said, "Well, what did you sing?" He said, "We sang, oh, this and that," and I said, "Well, how does that go?"

**Ahern:** And he sang it.

**Young:** He started singing. He was wonderful.

**Ahern:** Well, he loved singing, I can tell you. We had some good old nights that I could tell you, there were many years, even up until 2000-something. We had one great night and one great sing-song that we all enjoyed, in government buildings, just after Christmas, with Vicki and himself. Of course Vicki and all the family were over this summer, in July; they got the Tipperary Peace Prize.

**Young:** She and Jean came over.

**Ahern:** Yes, and about ten of the family, different nieces and nephews. I could keep you here all day talking about some of the things, but he was very close to us. He was a good guy.

**Young:** He was a very unusual American public figure.

**Ahern:** There's always the course to question, we often talked about here, if he had have won the Presidency.

**Young:** Eighty. He ran against [Jimmy] Carter.

**Ahern:** Yes. He would have been gone out of that political light and we wouldn't have had all this help, and he wouldn't have done all the legislation on the statute books in America.

**Young:** I wouldn't be too sure of that.

**Ahern:** He would have stayed around, anyway.

**Young:** I think he would never have been uninvolved.

**Ahern:** Yes, he would have been one of those guys.

**Young:** Yes. You might have gotten it much sooner if he had been President.

**Ahern:** He might have helped us, even though I think these things go in cycles, don't they? They go in cycles.