

TONY BLAIR AND BERTIE AHERN DOORSTEP INTERVIEWS - 1 JULY 1999

TONY BLAIR

First of all let's just be very clear for people here in Northern Ireland particularly. But wider than that to exactly where we are and exactly what things need to be done in order to get agreement. There has been huge progress. There is no doubt about that whatever. Indeed if I can strip away all the verbiage and the ifs and the buts and the things that you get in this part of the negotiation, there are three things that are absolutely clear. There is a complete commitment to establishing not just a fully inclusive Executive but all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and indeed the whole of that Good Friday Agreement. Everybody is committed to that. Everybody now recognises that decommissioning has to happen and has to happen not just by the May 2000 deadline, but everyone is also agreed, thirdly that it has to happen in the manner set out by the Independent Commission on decommissioning. Everybody is agreed on all those things. Where the issue is, is very simple. Some say there has got to be decommissioning, then the Executive and others say there has got to be the Executive and then decommissioning. Now I believe that what we have witnessed over the past few days are literally historic seismic shifts in the political landscape of Northern Ireland. We have for the first time Unionism making it perfectly clear and plain that they will share power on the basis of fairness and equality, not just an Executive but through all the institutions, North/South bodies, the British/Irish Council, all the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. And we have it clear also that Republicanism is prepared if the institutions are set up and the Good Friday Agreement implemented for there to be an end to all the violence and the suffering of people here. And not just on the part of Republicans but on the part of Loyalists too. So we have these historic shifts and we have got some how to find away around the problem that remains which is, in my view, no longer one of basic principle dividing the parties, but one of sequencing and timing. And I want to make it very clear that there is another thing as well. We are prepared as Governments to give absolute legislative fail-safe to both groups. To Unionism that if decommissioning doesn't happen in the way that the Independent Commission sets out, then those people who are in breach of what they agreed to do are out of the Executive and the institutions. And we are prepared to guarantee again to the Republicans and to the Nationalists that if those undertakings are honoured then there is no doubt at all that all the institutions should be fully set up and there should be no veto by Unionists or anybody else on those institutions being set up, working and fully implemented. So that is the position that we find ourselves in and I say to you categorically, not just here in Northern Ireland, but the entire civilised world will not understand if we cannot put this together and make it work. They simply won't understand it and rightly. So we are prepared to come here again, give it another try. Get all the parties around the table. Get them talking. Get them trying to work this thing out. That this is the thread by which the future of Northern Ireland hangs and I believe that we can do it. I believe for obvious reasons that we must. I also believe if we don't then it will be because in the end, for all sorts of reasons that are perfectly understandable, that are nonetheless deeply regrettable, that people simply lack the will and the courage to do it. But we can do it. Taoiseach.

BERTIE AHERN

Thank you very much. I want to say a few brief additional remarks and remarks of our joint support. Firstly, at 1.00 o'clock we will be 50 hours since last Friday trying to get over this stage of negotiations and that is a long time to have the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach and all of you. I think in that time there has been an enormous amount of useful and constructive dialogue and construction. I am not new nor is Tony Blair to a long dialogue and discussion but it seems, at least to us, that at 4.20 this morning that we had moved an enormous amount of the way to what we set up last Friday to do. To get an understanding that all elements and all aspects and all parts of the Good Friday

Agreement would be implemented. That the two real difficulties of the setting up of the Executive and the issue of decommissioning will be moved forward. And we have done that. There is agreement as the Prime Minister has said, that we have achieved that. And what is not there is the timing and sequencing and we could stay here till Christmas 12 months arguing that if one side is not in first then nobody is happy. But that seems just so unreasonable. Because in the end of the day what we are trying to do is to set up an Executive where these people, all of them good, all of them wanting to do their best for Northern Ireland from their own perspective are going to work together. We cannot make them work together but at least we can try and create the circumstances where that is possible. And now the argument is whether it is day one that we have decommissioning or whether it is a few months on that that happens and that's a small part of what all of the Good Friday Agreement is about and yes there was compromises yesterday, yes there was progress, yes there were things given that were never given before and yes I think we had honest effort in the hours that we spent trying to move things on. Now I feel that we can only really give it a few more hours because all of these issues have been debated to death and everyone knows the position and what frightens me quite frankly if we just can't agree over a few weeks, what the alternative is. I am trying not to think of that and I hope everybody else is doing it likewise but we need to concentrate on how we find the final few steps of compromise, otherwise we leave here and we will not succeed and that would I think be just unforgivable, unexplainable. I certainly would not be able to explain it over a matter of a few weeks or a few months. We know the issues. We have got agreement that decommissioning has to happen. We know all the arguments of how and in which process and we know about the inclusive Executive. It is required by the parties a few more moves to try to make that possible. We will do our best. There is an awful lot to gain and a frightening amount to lose and hopefully today does not lose that.

TONY BLAIR

Thanks Bertie. Sorry can I just say one other word to you which is to express my deep regret over the death of Willy Whitelaw and to pay my tribute to him. He was a politician who commanded enormous respect from friend and foe alike and he was a genuine and thoroughly decent man and he made a huge contribution to British public life. I know he will be sorely missed and sorely missed by many people here too. Thank you.