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Interview between Minister for Foreign Affairs and Shane Kenny
broadcast on 1.30 news on 24 August, 1979.

Interviewer: There's little doubt what has been the major story over the past 24 hours. Its the refusal by the Northern Secretary Humphrey Atkins to attend the New York Conference on Northern Ireland which was being Governor Hugh Carey. In Iveagh House this lunch time I asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Michael O'Kennedy, if he detected in this refusal a hardening of the British Government's attitude towards the Irish-American involvement in the Northern problem.

Minister: Well it was evident from the response of Mr Atkins some time back that they had some inhibitions at least about the meeting particularly after the manner in which it was announced by Governor Carey in New York. So I'm not particularly disappointed nor am I particularly surprised but I do think and I have conveyed this to Mr Atkins that it is important to recognise the legitimate and positive influence of the responsible Irish-American leaders. They have played a very positive role, they have a positive role to play in the future and I don't think that this response in any way overlooks or rejects that positive role .

Interviewer: But yet it is a fairly blunt rebuff. Do you not detect some note of hardening of the British Government's attitude to the Irish-American dimension?

Minister: Yes on the face of it it would seem that in the terms of the actual formal reply conveyed by Mr Atkins to Governor Carey it seems to be not just firm but perhaps cold. I think it would be regrettable frankly if that were to be the attitude of the British Government to people like say Speaker O'Neill, Senator Kennedy, Moynihan and Governor Carey also. They've played a very consistent and courageous role and from our dealings with them as a Government over a very considerable time we know the signifance and effect of that and I think the British Government, if they don't appreciate it now, should learn to appreciate it quickly.

Interviewer:

Did Mr Atkins have anything to say to you personally when he made his phone call to you about the Irish-American dimension?

Minister:

They've always recognised that this Government, any Irish Government has perhaps a closer contact and a more direct influence on the Irish-American than say a British Government would have and yes he did recognise that it was important to distinguish these people from some other elements in the Caucus group or other representatives of NORAID or otherwise who have made very negative contributions indeed very dangerous contributions to the Irish situation. But I'm not concerned that this is the end of the line as far as even the American influence is concerned because first of all that is a reality and will remain a reality and I think the British Government will recognise it as such, that's point one. There is another reality of course and its the reality of our very real interest here in this State and our legitimate involvement in the formulation of the outlines of solution.

Interviewer:

Were you concerned at all in that regard for a section of the Humphrey Atkins letter which says that its wrong for a member or it would be wrong for a member of Her Majesty's Government to participate in discussions or negotiations about the political future of a part of the UK in the US or elsewhere. Does that seem to rule out the involvement of Dublin to you?

Minister:

No, I don't think it could. First of all because its not at all in line with anything Mr Atkins has ever conveyed to me personally. From the very first moment that he came into office, from early days, he recognised and I quote "the interests of the Irish Government in a political settlement". And that has been in line with the theme that both of us have recognised and approached since then. The second point is that of course negotiations as such haven't started yet, therefore I'm not suggesting that this discussion in New York, had it taken place, couldn't be a discussion for negotiation in any event because negotiations hadn't started. We have and we do await with great interest

and with a sense of urgent interest the proposals from the British Government. We agreed that the new Government and the new Secretary of State should have time to read into this question to learn about it though we also acknowledge that there is a certain irony in the fact that a Government would need time to learn about something within their own jurisdiction but nonetheless they asked for time, we allowed it and we accept that its reasonable but that does mean that negotiations at some stage will have to get under way. Obviously this State has a very real constant and positive involvement at that stage.

Interviewer: Why do you think this statement was included then in the letter and the subsequent statement that Northern Ireland was a matter for negotiation between the British Government Westminster and the people of the Province of Northern Ireland?

Minister: I just don't know, it seems to me either to be evidence of perhaps rather careless formulation of a statement or else if its not careless it in fact ignores realities, realities that have always been recognised between us. It ignores, if that were to be the intention, which as I say I don't accept it would ignore another reality that the cost of the northern trouble if you want to call it such, is higher per head on this State than it is on the rest of the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland. Now if only on those terms because its costing us so much money of the order of about £20 per head of population in this year and that's excluding the cost of tourism I don't think anyone could suggest that we haven't a real interest if we only thought in selfish terms. But of course our interest extends far beyond that, it extends to the positive contribution we can make to reconciliation. Its fair to say, and this is important, its fair to say that there is a difference of view between this Government and the present British Government, any British Government for some time. We believe that its only through reconciliation in bringing the Irish people together within the North

and between North and South that you're going to get any hope for a long term solution. As yet the British Government haven't accepted that so we do have a difference of view but we believe that we can persuade them that our view is right.

Interviewer: Will you be seeking clarification from Mr Atkins about how the British Government considers the Dublin Government, the Irish Government's role in Northern Ireland?

Minister: No I don't think I need to seek clarification because I think the facts speak for themselves and I will be meeting Mr Atkins again needless to say and I've said its important to recognise that there is a difference of opinion. I think its also fair to say though that the problems that all of us have had to face have to a very considerable extent been due to political inactivity over a period in Britain and its for that reason that we wanted to allow breathing space to the new Government and its for that reason we're prepared to allow it up to a reasonable time. We have position papers ready for discussions which will make positive contributions and I think nobody, no British Government, who looked at the experience of the last fifty years could begin to suggest that this is not a matter in which Ireland, the Republic has a legitimate interest. To suggest that would be to ignore a reality and if we have an interest in security cooperation, which we acknowledge, which is costing us as I have said a very considerable sum of money, in this year something up to almost £60m and if we have an interest in economic cooperation so we have an interest in improving the wellbeing of the people who live near the border and elsewhere, that's a fact, nobody can ignore it and its one that we will obviously pursue.

Interviewer: What role do you think there is now for the Irish-American dimension? One senior Tory told me yesterday that they were very suspicious of Governor Carey's motives in getting involved in this initiative in the first place and you said that you think the publicity attached to it might have been harmful. What role is there for the Irish-Americans and do you think Governor Carey can be involved in the future?

Minister:

Well it is fair to say that these discussions had got under way, were meant to be private, as I understood them, and confidential. I was somewhat surprised, I have to say, with the publicity that attached to it when Governor Carey returned to New York. Because there was also as I understood it meant to be consultation with the other representatives who have shown a real interest, I mean particularly Tip O'Neill, Ted Kennedy and Moynihan. So that I think it wasn't too surprising in the light of the, one might say, unexpected publicity before the event that you saw the reaction you did. But that said I feel that the American interest, as expressed even by President Carter, and as maintained by these people of great influence is a reality, its a reality based on a positive interest. Its one that this Government recognises and I'm sure its one that the British Government will also recognise. Its not an intermeddling interest, we don't suggest that they have a role to negotiate. The negotiations must start/^{I accept}within the North first, between Governments secondly. Its a supportive role which they've offered to help friendly countries and I think that that role will remain until the beginnings of a solution emerge.

Interviewer:

And Governor Carey, can he be involved?

Minister:

Well he can but I don't think one should overestimate the role of any particular individual in any particular State. Govenor Carey has shown a consistent interest. Perhaps at a distance he is obviously influenced by current political activities in America and likely developments over the next year or so. That's inevitable, its a fact.

Interviewer:

So all of this has helped him in his own political campaigning in New York.

Minister:

It may have but its fair to say before this emerged Govenor Carey has expressed consistent and public interest as have the others. I'm not going to comment on the political tactics of individual politicians in America, that's their business but I would say by in large that as long as the interest is positive and effective and it generally has been from the group of

people I've spoken about, it should be recognised as such and encouraged.

Interviewer: You mentioned that you thought the role of the Irish National Caucus could in fact be dangerous in the United States and they are getting involved as much as they possibly can in the Irish-American dimension at the moment. Do you still want responsible Irish-American thinking to exclude them?

Minister : O yes, I don't want to exclude them, but when you're dealing face to face, government to government, as we are in a sense with the American administration or the British administration, I mean you could hardly imagine that we would want some others to intervene to give a presentation that they are significant when in fact we don't either need their support or recognise their significance. So when some representatives of the Irish National Caucus came over here recently, presented themselves, even on RTE, as representing a Caucus which was mostly composed, I think to quote the report on RTE 1 of Senators and Congressmen first of all that is factually untrue, secondly when we're dealing as I say government to government, even with the President and when our Taoiseach will be going over there I don't think we need the interference, as we see it, of a Caucus that haven't always been consistent in their approach. And from our point of view and I think our people are entitled to expect this, they elect us the Government, we have an obligation to deal on that basis, nobody elect the Caucus, they are self-elected group who apparently are fairly good at propagandising, particularly here whatever about in America.

Interviewer: What about the statement made by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs that they were in fact a front group for the Provisional IRA. Is that the Government's view still?

Minister:

Well there's certainly evidence over the period that the tone if not the content of their expressions indicated that they were close to the Provisional IRA, close, if not in activity, in sympathy. There has been apparently some difference of opinion, if not a falling-out between the Caucus and the Provisional Sinn Féin or Provisional IRA. That's a matter that only they themselves can explain. But from our point of view even I note that Congressman Biaggi even in commenting on the Governor Carey attempt to organise these talks said it couldn't come to anything unless and I quote him "fighting men of each side were represented at the table". That's not quite the view of this Government and that I think in its own way illustrates the difference between the Caucus, whether its Fr. McManus or any others or Congressman Biaggi, and the Irish-American responsible lobby and that expressed by President Carter and that expressed by our Government.

Interviewer:

An Irish branch of the National Caucus has been set up with Seán McBride included and he said that the Caucus in the United States is misunderstood by politicians/^{here} Would you reject that attitude totally?

Minister:

I heard the interview in which Mr McBride said that and it seems to me that Mr McBride himself has some misunderstanding of what this Caucus represents. He seemed to be talking, when I heard him, of the historical Irish Caucus in America which is a general thing like the Irish-American lobby. But there are three different elements now you have this Caucus, this national Caucus, who claim to be what in fact they are not in our view, an element of real influence. If he means the general Irish-American interest is a Caucus, that's fair enough, that's always been there, but how do you see it best expressed and implemented from our point of view in those who are the elected leaders there as in Ireland and that to us means people like Speaker O'Neill, Senator Kennedy, Moynihan, Carey and many others, incidentally who aren't just of Irish-American extraction, I'm not just thinking of people like McGovern as well who have shown a real interest but people like Senator Eagleton. That's the kind of interest that we would regard

as the effective lobby whether you would call that a Caucus or not is another matter. But I think that maybe Mr McBride seems to, with the best intentions in the world, seems to have been misled a little in thinking that to promote the national Caucus, that's what we call it for precise definition, is a very useful contribution. That's not the Government's opinion.

Interviewer: When will we see some initiative by the new British Government on Northern Ireland, has Mr Atkins given you any indication, any clues?

Minister: We haven't put a timetable on it, but I can say that we would expect that certainly before the end of this year the British Government, after a period of study, reflection and discussion, to enable them to inform themselves as Mr Atkins said, that they will then be in a position to come forward with the beginnings at least of proposals. Because what we've seen in the meantime over the last three years at least has been total political vacuum in which only the men of violence have gained both strength and sometimes recognition and indeed which the men, public representatives have been made totally irrelevant in the North of Ireland particularly, its obviously time for that to stop, that process must be arrested and instead of watching politicians wither away and men of violence and terrorism come into full bloom, its time to correct that situation. The British Government must recognise that and I would expect that before the end of this year we'll see the beginnings of some proposals.

C. C. M. Reagin

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