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Assembly Elections file

Interview with Mr. John Hume and Rev. Ian Paisley, 'This Week', RTE

29 August 1982

Leo Enright: After a long period of division within the party, the SDLP this week finally decided that it would contest the elections to the new Assembly in the North but members won't be taking their seats there. It was seen by some commentators as the final death blow to an Assembly to which so many were already resolutely opposed. Northern Secretary of State, Jim Prior, tried to put a brave face on it and Unionist leaders began thinking the British just might hand the reins of power directly to them. So is the North once again facing political stalemate? This weekend Loyalist leader, Ian Paisley, came into our Belfast studio and we were joined here in Dublin by John Hume of the SDLP. First, John Hume on why the party said 'no' to participation in the Assembly.

John Hume: We will not be taking any part whatsoever in Mr. Prior's Assembly plan, we've made that very clear, but we will use our mandate from the election, we will use the election to show that that position is strongly supported, the rejection of that plan is strongly supported by the population and we will use the mandate to hold ourselves in readiness to enter discussions or negotiations with the British Government about any meaningful plan for the future or, indeed, to take part in any meaningful institution in the future, but we have held for a very long time that Mr. Prior's plan is not workable. It's very obvious to anybody why it's not workable. It's not only the SDLP who hold that view, it's held widely across the community in the North of Ireland, all three major newspapers hold it so we do not see any point whatsoever in pretending that this Assembly can provide the basis for peace and stability. Mr. Paisley has already made it clear that there aren't any circumstances in which he will be involved in power-sharing with the SDLP. The Official Unionist Party have done the same thing, therefore you cannot form a cross-community - this is the new term - administration, we know that before we start. The Unionists, various Unionist parties, have been telling us that for years. We tried to work it in '73, in '76 and in '79. This time we are saying, well we are

not going through the same motions again.

Leo Enright: Ian Paisley, it's quite clear from successive elections in the North that the SDLP are the predominant party on the minority side in Northern Ireland. Given that they are not going to participate in the Assembly, doesn't that mean in itself, no matter how much you may regret it, that the Assembly really is a dead letter now?

Ian Paisley: No, I don't accept that at all. Mr. Hume makes it clear that he will not take part in what he is prepared to call a 'meaningful assembly'. That 'meaningful assembly' to him has nothing whatsoever to do with the wishes of a democratic community who take part in a democratic vote. That is to do with, number one, that he wants a power-sharing set-up as an interim measure and the object of the whole exercise is to take us into a united Ireland. Now, let me say absolutely clearly that as far as the majority of people in Northern Ireland are concerned that is not on. So if the SDLP are simply saying 'except you agree to institutionalised power-sharing as a way into an eventual united Ireland, we will take no part in any assembly', then we have got the message and the message is simply this, 'it is a united Ireland or nothing'. Well as far as the Unionist population are concerned, they will resist that and resist it to the death.

Leo Enright: But haven't the British Government also made it clear, in so many words, that they will not accept any institutionalised form of government in the North that does not include a form of power-sharing, it's not just the SDLP?

Ian Paisley: Well, that does not matter because there is a section of the Bill which says if there is a 70% of the Assembly in agreement with a form of government, then that must go before the British Parliament and the British Parliament must have the final say on that particular matter but let me make it absolutely clear that as long as the SDLP insist that at the end of the day there must be a united Ireland and in the meantime

they must be as of right in any Government of Northern Ireland, then there is no way in which the Unionist Party are going to take part in an act of suicide of their own position and, I mean, that is absolutely clear.

John Hume:

Northern Ireland as an entity can only work, can only be made work by those for whom it was set up and that is the Unionists. There are only two ways in which they can make it work, one is by majority rule, which Mr. Paisley wants and which they had for most of this century and which has led to the disaster that we find ourselves now in, so that is clearly not on. The other way is in partnership between both sections of the community which Mr. Paisley also rejects, so he cannot start claiming democracy or democratic majorities in a place like Northern Ireland where the majority was deliberately rigged from the very beginning and if he is not prepared to have a partnership between both sections of the community, and he is not, because not only has he consistently held that view, but at local government level in the North where anywhere the SDLP is in a majority position we have shared power and responsibility - indeed, in Newry one of Mr. Paisley's own party is Chairman of Newry Council because the SDLP voted him in - but elsewhere a complete hard-nosed nothing.

Leo Enright:

But he says that your policy is effectively a united Ireland or nothing now. Have you given up on an internal settlement within Northern Ireland?

John Hume:

Well, I've just made it very clear why a purely internal settlement in Northern Ireland cannot work because none of the two ways of doing it will Mr. Paisley or his friends agree to. Now the minority population in Northern Ireland have a very hard and bitter experience of life in the North of Ireland under a majority rule administration and they see the views that are being put forward by Mr. Paisley now and they don't see that any administration run by people like that has any future for them and, I mean, that's just self-evident and it doesn't matter, Mr. Paisley can dance on his head if he likes but people are not going to change their attitudes. Now, he says that it's because we are trying to lead people into a united Ireland against their will. He knows that we can't unite Ireland against the will of the majority of people in Northern Ireland. Unity means agreement and agreement has to be won and our view of a solution has always been that a partnership between the communities in the North and a fully

agreed partnership between both parts of the island doesn't mean that anybody is forced into anything, it means that the people are going to work together rather than confront each other and let the future evolve as relations between all the different sections of the people in this island improve.

Leo Enright: Ian Paisley, is your attitude really that you are simply not interested in any form of partnership?

Ian Paisley: First of all, I think that we have got to answer that. It is completely and totally untrue what Mr. Hume has said about local government. Let's take the example of Magherafelt where, in Magherafelt, there has been no effort whatsoever by the SDLP, in fact they have joined up with Republicans to see that there shall be no sharing of interests as far as Magherafelt is concerned and this happened also ...

John Hume: Well now, we'll not go into Magherafelt and your Mr. McCrea, your friend Mr. McCrea, we won't go into Magherafelt.

Ian Paisley: Listen, this also happened in Londonderry when there was an occasion when not one Democratic Unionist member was on any committee of the Corporation when the SDLP were in control, so there is no use them saying that. But let me take the other end of the stick, let's look at the south of Ireland. What has happened to the Protestant population in the south of Ireland? It has almost evaporated since we had partition. Mr. Hume is saying that people in the North, that Roman Catholics in the North have had a very raw deal from the Unionists. The Roman Catholics in the North have increased in their population and size, the Protestant population has almost shrunk away as a result of partition. Now let me make it perfectly clear, Mr. Hume is not interested, and he has said this over and over again, just in a partnership government, he is interested in a final united Ireland. He wants to force us to have a partnership government and if the ballot box says no to that, then he will not play the democratic game and then he says, 'of course we wouldn't force you into a united Ireland' but we know perfectly well by his attitude that he

wants to force us into partnership and that partnership must in the end take us into a united Ireland, so there is no way, and he says I can dance on my head, well he can dance on his head all day, it's not going to be ever a united Ireland as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland, by the ballot box, say no. You want to be elected and discuss the future of Northern Ireland outside the forum as you have already said

John Hume:

That's right.

Ian Paisley:

We want to discuss the future of Northern Ireland inside the forum and that's the terms that the British Government has set out. You accuse us of not keeping to those terms, we are keeping to those terms, it's the SDLP that's not keeping to the terms.

John Hume:

In 1973 we entered an assembly and formed an administration which you brought down, and your friends, on the streets. In 1976 you argued for a convention for the people of Northern Ireland, you said, to decide their own future. You were given that convention but guidelines were laid down, we accepted the guidelines, you did not. Nothing came out of the Convention. The same with Mr. Atkins in 1979. Now it is precisely the same again we are being invited to do but you have made clear in advance that you are not accepting the guidelines. Now, we have no intention

Ian Paisley:

First of all, this is not so. Let me say this, Mr. Atkins

John Hume:

Could I finish?

Leo Enright:

Ian Paisley, could we just let John Hume finish that point and then we'll come back to you.

John Hume:

On this occasion we are simply saying we are not prepared to go through the same again because we know the result before we start. Secondly, the British Government's position is that in '73 it was power-sharing and a meaningful Irish dimension. Then they quietly side-lined the Irish dimension. Now what they are saying is that power-sharing is not guaranteed, power-sharing is now the gift of people like yourself and the Unionists and that's why you're so keen on

this assembly. You'll use it for your own ends. Now, the SDLP and the people they represent have some self-respect and vis-a-vis both yourselves and the British we are simply shouting 'stop' and we are saying 'thus far and no further, enough is enough' and the full strength of our community will emerge in this election to let you know and let the British Government know that we are reasonable people but that doesn't mean we can be walked over.

Ian Paisley:

Well, let me make it perfectly clear that Mr. Hume now is admitting that the British Government terms is not power-sharing and not a united Ireland dimension. He said at first that the terms that Britain had set out we would not accept. Now he is coming clean and saying, 'ah, but the British Government have weakened on these two points

John Hume:

They have weakened their position, there is no doubt about that but even their weakened position you will not accept.

Ian Paisley:

As the result of the continual strength of the Unionist people in saying to the British Government the way forward is by the ballot box and not by the bomb and by the bullet. Could I say that the Unionist people of all groups will tell the British Government and will tell the world exactly the strength of their opposition to any plan to destroy Northern Ireland and take it out of the United Kingdom. Evidently Dublin has not got that message, evidently Mr. Hume has not got that message. If the British Government have not got that message, the last speech I made in the House of Commons on this issue I said wait till you see the ballot boxes opened and then you'll see the strength of feeling democratically expressed in Northern Ireland as far as the Unionist position is concerned.

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