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THE WORLD AT ONE:NEWS : RADIO 4 : 1300 : 4.12.85

SIR ROBIN DAY:

The Northern Ireland Secretary, Mr. Tom King has stirred up an Anglo-Irish row in Brussels yesterday, by suggesting in a lunch time speech that the Irish leader, Garret Fitzgerald, had accepted that there would never be a united Ireland. However, in a later speech at dinner time, Mr. King corrected what Dr. Garret Fitzgerald had quickly condemned as a mistake. The opposition have requested a statement from Mr. King in the House this afternoon, and he's now in our Westminster studio, but first here is what Mr. King actually said yesterday at lunch time, speaking without notes, in what has quickly come to be called his King-size gaff.

RT.HON TOM KING MP:

In Northern Ireland now we have signed an agreement in which the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland, notwithstanding the fact that he faces, or has to live with a constitution that has aspirations about sovereignty over the North of Ireland, has in fact accepted that for all practical purposes and into perpetuity, there will never be a united Ireland, because he has accepted that the principle of consent, that the will of the majority in Northern Ireland must predominate, and therefore that Northern Ireland, which is our fervent wish, remains part of the United Kingdom.

R.D:

Mr. King, do you agree with Dr. Garret Fitzgerald that your statement was inaccurate, inappropriate and a mistake?

T.K:

Well, what I certainly would make absolutely clear is that while I stand by my judgement on the consent of the majority, which I think will stay for union with the United Kingdom, I think therefore those will be the implications of what, of the agreement that has been signed, I certainly would make absolutely clear that the idea that this was, as it were, accepted in advance by Dr. Fitzgerald, that that is not an implication that I would wish to make, or by the Irish Government.

I know that they would take a different view about what the consequences would be.

R.D:

But do you therefore admit that you made a mistake in saying that they had accepted that there'd never be a united Ireland into perpetuity?

T.K:

I believe, I believe that because the principle of consent, and this is what I said in my speech, because he has accepted that the principle of consent, that the will of the majority must predominate, I then reached the judgement, and this is my own judgement, that that majority will not alter. And if that is the case, then there will not be any change in the status of Northern Ireland.

R.D:

But what you actually said, Mr. King, you said, Dr. Fitzgerald has in fact accepted that for all practical purposes and into perpetuity there will never be a united Ireland. Now Dr. Fitzgerald has not accepted anything of the kind.

T.K:

Yes, yes. May I say this? What I've, is that I believe is that this is the implication of the agreement that has been accepted. I certainly would want to make quite clear that I am not seeking to say that Dr. Fitzgerald has himself consciously accepted that point. I believe...

R.D:

In what way is it, in what way is it the implication of the agreement? Because Dr. Fitzgerald will tell the Irish Parliament this afternoon that there is no implication that he's given up the idea of a united Ireland at all.

T.K:

We're talking about the principle of consent, and I am making it my judgement that the consent of the majority, which is the first article in the agreement, that the consent of the majority is needed before any change in the status of Northern

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Ireland. And it is my view, and it is of course our aim as well, to ensure that there isn't any change in that majority, we hope to make, and part of the purpose of the agreement, as far as we're concerned, is to make government of Northern Ireland acceptable both to the majority and the minority communities. That must be our ambition.

R.D:

But you...

T.K:

Now, it's not shared, I accept that, it is not shared in the same way by the Government of the Republic, and I understand that. They would take a different view. It's my forecast, they have their forecast. I'm giving my forecast of what the implication of the first article actually means.

R.D:

But your words were mistaken and misguided, were they not?

T.K:

Well I certainly make absolutely clear that, I, I accept that they could be read to imply that he had consciously accepted this. I believe it will be the outcome of the agreement, an agreement which we believe will help to strengthen the position of Government in Northern Ireland, and make it more acceptable, both to the majority and the minority communities.

R.D:

Speaking just now on ITN, Mr. King, you referred to the Anglo-Irish agreement as a bulwark against a united Ireland. Now Dr. Fitzgerald doesn't see it that way.

T.K:

I make quite clear, we see article 1, I made this quite clearly, in a different light. We, but we are both agreed on the principle of consent. And what some have tried to suggest is that that doesn't mean anything, that it's been suggested by some unionists that this is a very slippery slope into a united Ireland. I was seeking to put the other point of view, that I think, rather than being a slippery slope, I think the

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protection given by the requirement of the consent of the majority is indeed a bulwark.

R.D:

Well, the, the Democratic Unionist Party Chief Whip today doesn't seem to be very impressed with that, he says, quote, in an effort to con unionists, Mr. King has tried the big lie, and is now on, and is now choking on having to eat his own words.

T.K:

Well, I'm very interested if the unionist in question actually believes that the majority of people don't want, would vote for a change in the status. I don't believe they would, and if that is the case, then they have that clear protection in the agreement that we have signed.

R.D:

Mr. King, finally and very briefly, haven't you broken the golden politician's rule, never say never?

T.K:

Well I have, give my judgement, my forecast, I don't think it will change. But this obviously, certainly, as far as I can see, I see no prospect of a change in the view of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland of wishing to be a part of the United Kingdom.

R.D:

Secretary of State, thank you very much.

T.K:

Thank you.
