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BBC BREAKFAST WITH FROST

INTERVIEW: JAMES MOLYNEAUX

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DAVID FROST:

And now we turn to the subject of Northern Ireland, the peace moves in Northern Ireland continue to be devilled by high-profile revelations and errors and recriminations and the British and Irish Prime Ministers finally got together last Friday, just two days ago, but their meeting ended without any formal statement or agreement, just a promise to meet again next week. This morning there's a fresh row over the Republic of Ireland's constitutional claim on the North. Newspaper reports, as we've just heard, saying that John Major is softening his line, Downing Street sources this morning deny it. Joining me now from our Belfast studio, a vital figure in the future of Ireland, the leader of the Ulster official Unionists, James Molyneaux. James good morning.

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Good morning to you Robin...sorry David.

DAVID FROST:

Jesus I'm looking older this morning, it's the glasses, it's an easy mistake to make. Now I know in fact you can't see very clearly from the other end there because you've actually got us coming into your ear but you don't have the delightful picture that we have of you. The Sunday Telegraph here this morning, we quoted it earlier, Major softens line on Irish claims to Ulster, now denied by Downing Street, the suggestion that he's relaxing

on his demand for a statement to mention repealing Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, what was your reaction to that story this morning?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well Downing Street was quite right because it was not John Major who said that, I said it in my contribution to the Queen's Speech. On your programme Mr Reynolds said to you that if he were forced to put that referendum to the people of the South of Ireland he could not get it through and thereby it would damage his government. I said, not unreasonably, that who were we to question his position and why didn't we accept what he said, after all he knows best, and that if we were going to be required to agree to something which would be manifestly far more serious for Northern Ireland, then the people, a lot of the people in Northern Ireland would say 'well why worry about it'. So I think it came from me two weeks ago, not from Mr Major.

DAVID FROST:

Well I mean the point was that what Albert Reynolds said here on this programme, he said he couldn't put such a referendum to the people now, in the morning they wouldn't pass it, but he said that "we are prepared to ask the Irish people 'are you prepared to change Articles 2 and 3', I've given that commitment and that's what the Unionist population wanted me to give and they've got that commitment in relation to it". So you have a commitment that he would put it to a referendum but only when the clear, whole outline of the package is clear?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Yes that's right, only when he would get something more enforceable than the unenforceable Articles 2 and 3 which he's got at the moment and that other alternative would have been joint authority over Northern Ireland leading on to our being involved in a United Ireland, that's what he meant.

DAVID FROST:

Well he did make that pledge or that promise anyway, also the other story this morning, there's so much to talk about, was the Ulster politicians, the claims of the IRA to have put out peace feelers to moderate Loyalists in Northern Ireland. Are you aware, as the Observer says today, that that has happened, that there have been IRA peace feelers to Protestants?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well I would be flattered if people had termed me a moderate Unionist, they haven't been in touch with me certainly but I don't doubt that all this kind of thing does happen. I'm always, I would've been surprised, for example, earlier in the week, if someone told me that no contacts were made with the IRA or with any other terrorist organisation, after all this kind of hanky-panky's been going on for 20 years, I don't doubt that it is happening.

DAVID FROST:

And in terms of what's happening you have given the government the benefit of the doubt on their contacts with the IRA, haven't you?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well I've taken the rather cynical view, that's because of my great age I suppose, that it has been going on and we've all seen it go on from right back from Willy Whitelaw's time - the tea and buns and then in Paul Channon's flat - and I'm sure Willy shook hands with him as they were leaving and said "I'm terribly sorry we didn't reach complete agreement but do keep in touch chaps, do keep in touch". And then we had Merlyn Rees' incident centres, then we have the mechanism continuously in operation, exchanging the details of the recognised codewords which you hear repeatedly quite frequently in regard to the planting of bombs and that sort of thing. So it's been going on and the evidence of it has been there and you remember that Enoch Powell and I, as far back as

1979, 1980, 1981, were alerting people to all of this and we were laughed to scorn by the industry, news industry and I have to say a great many Unionists as well.

DAVID FROST:

But at the same time do you think that there is a chance of peace by Christmas or a joint declaration by Christmas, I mean...?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Oh I think that you mentioned earlier on in the programme about high profile, I don't think things ever done by means of high profile, I do not think - although I would like to see peace tomorrow if that were possible - I do not think it will happen in that way. I think that the proper course is that in which Her Majesty's government is embarked, the news industry don't seem to want to know about it. We have been working quietly in discussions and bilateral basis with Michael Ancram the junior minister who's in charge of political development for three solid months, we have made that known that that is going on but nobody anywhere wants to be interested because it's not high-wire summitry. But I'm confident that that will deliver because you see what it will do will enable the people of Northern Ireland, and they have the key to it - it will enable them to find a common denominator position which will enable them to work together, perhaps at a low level of administrative government building up gradually to something higher. But you see it's based on my firm belief that we have in Northern Ireland one community not two, and my job is to draw together the strands of that community and if you ask me how wide that is, it's exactly 85 per cent of the population simply want to get on with their everyday life and work together at ease with each other.

DAVID FROST:

And when you talk about the plans for the future and the last three months working with Michael Ancram do you hope that that would be a more constructive way to peace, is that what you're saying?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well of course it is because you see if you get Prime Ministers round a table, if you get party leaders around a table particularly in Northern Ireland, you then ask them to which nation do they want to belong and of course they'll tell you and once they've told you well then it's all up with any progress. So the sensible way to do it is to recognise that there are differences, differences of aspirations but reflecting that view of what I call the greater number which has been, for example, confirmed in the Irish Times public opinion poll taken only seven days ago. You have the greater number of whom I speak, Protestants and Roman Catholics, 85 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland simply want to get on with their everyday affairs without any interference, or indeed any summitry.

DAVID FROST:

And in fact 23 per cent was the figure, wasn't it, of Roman Catholics who wanted a United Ireland?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

No there's only 14.7 who wanted a United Ireland.

DAVID FROST:

Oh well there's another one, it was only 23 per cent of Catholics which would come back probably to about 14.7 overall of the population. But I mean did you welcome the talks on Friday, do you welcome the next meeting later this week between the Prime Minister and Albert Reynolds, do you welcome those things or as you just said about summitry do you think we'd be much better off without all this summitry?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

We would be much better off without it and I've always taken this view and I think Baroness Thatcher used to share my view when she was leader of another party in Parliament before she became Prime Minister, she used to find it all very tiresome as she did in her early days, I think she acquired a liking for it later on

because, well certain high profile naturally that sort of thing doesn't appeal to me but summitry is something which is highly damaging and therefore I didn't advise against the meeting yesterday, I think what was very useful in that they downgraded it from calling it summit, even so there was far too much expectation built up because what the newspapers were talking about couldn't possibly be delivered.

DAVID FROST:

And what about, you clearly although you don't agree about summits and so on, you obviously, as you said, we do understand each other, have a very good relationship with John Major, what is what Ken McGuinness described in July as your arrangement, he called it, with John Major?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

The arrangement is exactly the same as it was with Jim Callaghan in his time, that provided Her Majesty's government elected by the Parliament, by the people of the United Kingdom, provided they are governing in the best interests of the United Kingdom in general and of Northern Ireland in particular, these are the key words, we will not terminate the life of the Parliament prematurely. That's exactly what the formula is.

DAVID FROST:

And in terms of the future of Northern Ireland, in terms of messages from these, from these meetings, Albert Reynolds said for instance that he would go anywhere at any time to talk to any political leader. Would you like him to come and see you?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

At some stage we would be prepared to repeat what we did last year, for instance remember Mr Paisley and I way back, four years ago signed up to the prospect, not just the prospect, but to the plan to meet at some stage with Irish government ministers. We did that, particularly last year for quite a long time, I myself led my delegation to Dublin, there isn't any barrier to that if

there's evidence that it's going to lead to something but we don't want to indulge in mere summitry as a gimmick if it's not going to lead to anything.

DAVID FROST:

You and Ian Paisley have sort of agreed to disagree at the moment, haven't you?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

We have a very civilised relationship, we were speaking on the telephone only last evening, yes.

DAVID FROST:

So that your...

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

We're two separate parties so...

DAVID FROST:

Are you in parallel or are you different?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Both, we're in parallel on the things that really matter, the retention of Northern Ireland by the will of the greater number of people, 85 per cent of the people in Northern Ireland are simply wishing to stay within the United Kingdom. We would differ of course on the tactics, we would differ I suppose on the presentation of our cases in public, but on that there isn't a great difference in that respect.

DAVID FROST:

Now at the moment the two governments are trying to come up with a form of words that will persuade the IRA to lay down their arms and for a cessation of violence. What have you got to offer them? What would be your message to the IRA to persuade them to lay down their arms?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well my message would be exactly the same as it would be to the Loyalist paramilitaries, to any criminals anywhere in the United Kingdom - stop being criminals - that's for starters.

DAVID FROST:

And how would you persuade them that it was in their interests to do so?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well I think you don't need to persuade criminals to stop being criminals, you simply say to them - you're breaking the law of the land, you're acting against the wishes of the greater number of people in your own country, you're trying to get by violence what you cannot get by democratic means so will you stop it. That's all one's got to say.

DAVID FROST:

And when do you think such a cessation of violence might happen?

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Well I don't think we should discount entirely the sum of the truth which have been emerging from the rather confused disclosures of the past week or so. There had been feelers put out, do you remember, even a year ago today before Christmas in regard to an extended ceasefire over Christmas, there was a 51-point plan no doubt evolved through the same channels which were disclosed only about a week ago. So that I think there is something in that that paramilitaries on all sides are now beginning to see that they cannot get by violence that which is available through the ballot box and therefore I think that they themselves may be coming to the conclusion, there are signs that they are coming to the conclusion that it isn't worth going on any longer.

DAVID FROST:

James Molyneaux thank you very much for joining us this morning we hope in some way that we will find hope in the situation, we'll obviously be talking about it with Douglas Hurd in a moment or two, but right for now thank you very much indeed.

JAMES MOLYNEAUX:

Thank you.

DAVID FROST:

James Molyneaux there.

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