EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH NIALL O'DOWD

November 18, 2010
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Interviewer

University of Virginia

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TRANSCRIPT

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Young: This begins the interview with Mr. O'Dowd, on November 18th, in New York. It looks to me, from a lot of reading, as though you got deeply involved in the peace process or the effort to find a political solution to the problem, at about the time [William J.] Clinton was running for President.

O'Dowd: Yes.

Young: Is that right, or did you have—what was your connection with Kennedy or Gerry Adams and the Irish government before that?

O'Dowd: My connection with Kennedy began with the issue of immigration. I was one of the people in the mid-'80s who began a lobby aimed at helping young Irish undocumented who had come to America and were living here illegally. It soon became clear to me that Ted Kennedy was a huge answer to that particular problem, and that any solution we would be dealing with would go through him. In that respect, I didn't get to know Kennedy personally at that point, but I interacted extensively with his office and occasionally with him on the issue of illegal immigration.

As it turned out, Kennedy was the behind-the-scenes architect of two visa bills. One was called the Morrison Visas, after Congressman Bruce Morrison, and the other was called the Donnelly Visas, after Congressman Brian Donnelly, who was from the same state as Ted. But it was obvious to me that Ted was really pulling the levers, and nothing could move, particularly on any Irish-related issue in the U.S. Senate, without Ted actually approving.

It had struck me at the time, because my other great passion was Northern Ireland, that when the time came, Ted Kennedy would have to be the major player in terms of the U.S. political scene, and that opportunity eventually arose. Not right away, but as the immigration issue faded and I began to pay more attention to Northern Ireland, it just so happened that we were looking for a political candidate who was not George [Herbert Walker] Bush, George Bush the First, who at that point looked like he was going to be reelected. So we encountered President Clinton, or as he was then, Governor Clinton.

Young: Yes.

O'Dowd: A friend of mine in the Irish Embassy in Washington called Brendan Scannell, with whom I was personally very friendly, had told me about this Governor of Arkansas. Brendan had

said that, in his opinion, "This guy would definitely be interested in Northern Ireland." So I had done a number of things trying to reach out to Clinton and eventually, as it turned out, they reached out to me. So it was a win-win on both sides.

Young: Was the occasion for that his campaign in New York?

O'Dowd: Yes. Also, I had written him letters about whether or not he was interested in the issue of Northern Ireland, and he had responded that he had spent time in Oxford in the 1960s and actually had been quite in favor of Northern Ireland because of his time there, and because the Civil Rights Movement was just starting up. I then got heavily involved in President Clinton's campaign, his first run for President, and I co-founded an organization called Irish Americans for Clinton. One of the things we did was to get undertakings from his campaign, actually from Nancy Soderberg, who had worked with Kennedy, that Clinton would pay close attention to the issue if he came into power.

And then once he was elected we went back to him and it was soon clear to me again that as with every other issue relating to Ireland, the road was going through Kennedy's office. I set up a relationship with Trina Vargo, who was Kennedy's Irish person, and presented her a list of ideas, the chief of which was a visa for Gerry Adams. I felt, based on my contacts with Sinn Féin and the IRA [Irish Republican Army], that they would respond very positively to that.

Young: Before that contact was made with Trina, Clinton, as I recall, had made two, or possibly three, fairly strong campaign statements supporting a visa, the [Sean] MacBride Principles and the peace envoy.

O'Dowd: Right. The special envoy.

Young: And those were all things that you and your organization had pressed upon.

O'Dowd: Absolutely, yes.

Young: And so during that campaign, it was all favorable.

O'Dowd: It was all favorable.

Young: But after he got elected— [*laughter*]

O'Dowd: That's the great thing about being around long enough, you see the same pattern. What's promised and what's delivered are two different things. There were some early setbacks with President Clinton, which really had to do with the time not being right. More than anything, the appointment by Teddy, indirectly, of Jean [Kennedy Smith] to be Ambassador to Dublin, was very significant in terms of giving us an ally in an absolutely key position. Because from my point of view, the real hostility in the administration came from the State Department. They were very Anglophilic and were not interested in disturbing the wonderful 200-year relationship that they had with Britain over this pesky issue of Northern Ireland. So they were not pleased at all that we were endeavoring to change the dynamic. Having Jean in Dublin was a tremendous opportunity for us to talk not only to Jean but indirectly to her brother, to create a different

nexus. That is what I was interested in doing. You dealt with the political aspect of this rather than the administrative or diplomatic side of it.

It was obvious to me right away, because Nancy Soderberg was in the administration and dealing with the issue, that it was all being filtered through a Kennedy prism. So you had to convince Ted Kennedy that Gerry Adams should have a visa before you could convince Bill Clinton.

Young: And he [Kennedy] needed convincing.

O'Dowd: He needed a lot of convincing. It all looks great in retrospect. I'm always amazed at the number of people who claim credit for what happened, but it was actually quite an uphill struggle. At key moments it looked very bad.

Young: Could you talk a little bit about that? I think one of the things the oral history can do is get this right, because there's a lot of myth.

O'Dowd: There's an awful lot of myth.

Young: I'm trying to get down to what really happened.

O'Dowd: What really happened was after the election, I sat down in a restaurant here in New York with the Sinn Féin representative in America, a guy called Ciaran Staunton, who later became my brother-in-law, and a man called Bill Flynn, who was a close friend of Senator Kennedy. And we decided on a strategy. That strategy was to ignore the issue of the envoy and the MacBride Principles and say, "A visa is the way to go."

My belief was that this would be a proactive move by the administration that would completely and utterly change the dynamic of the Northern Irish situation, if America was seen to intervene directly. Appointing an envoy wouldn't have meant the same thing. That would have meant a long-term process, but a visa would be an immediate jolt. I believed very strongly that if you introduced the United States into the equation the entire dynamic of the peace process would be changed. All of the parties involved would suddenly have to react and take into account the fact that America was now deeply involved in the peace process.

Young: Right. And that would mean in turn that you had to establish—you had to get President Clinton's ear.

O'Dowd: Exactly.

Young: Because the State Department was not going to be of help.

O'Dowd: No. The State Department or the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or any of those people were not going to be of help here. But what was fundamental was through my own sources, going to visit Sinn Féin and the IRA, and getting from them the undertaking. I began to work with the Clinton Administration through Kennedy's office, through Trina Vargo, because people still did not want to deal with me at that point. I was seen as in the camp of Sinn Féin, which actually wasn't true, to be honest, but I understood that they needed to have some distance.

We were really a bunch of amateur diplomats, basically. Trina became a very close friend as well as an ally, and I was constantly aware from her memos or notes to me, or our conversations, that Ted Kennedy was also weighing up this whole issue. I hadn't spoken directly to Kennedy about it, but a system was set up where I would relay information from Sinn Féin, through Trina, to Kennedy and to Soderberg. What eventually arose was that if the group I had headed went to Ireland and met with Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin would see that as a gesture from the Clinton Administration and react accordingly, with a seven-day, unannounced IRA ceasefire. That was the deal that I spent an awful lot of time trying to set up. I was trying to get people to trust that Sinn Féin would do that. And in Sinn Féin's case, getting them to trust that the White House would follow up if that happened.

Young: So Sinn Féin was regarded as a terrorist organization, isn't that one of the things?

O'Dowd: Yes.

Young: The British would always point that out.

O'Dowd: Oh, absolutely, yes. "We can't talk to terrorists," even though they were talking to them at the time.

Young: Yes, we've now found that out.

O'Dowd: Yes.

Young: So it was a question of an attitude change, as well as a change in connection.

O'Dowd: Yes.

Young: A political change in how you connected, to get meaningful action out of the American government.

O'Dowd: Yes. Well, I had been successful with the visa issue, with the undocumented Irish issue, and I had a feeling I knew how the levers worked. The levers were very simple when you were dealing with Ireland on Capitol Hill; get Kennedy, and Kennedy got everyone else. Convincing Kennedy was going to be the critical issue, even more than convincing Clinton, because Clinton would not do anything if Kennedy said no. I was perfectly aware of that fact.

And Kennedy, unfortunately in my opinion, had been badly advised over the years on the issue of Northern Ireland. I think American positive involvement could have happened a lot earlier, but the Irish government and the British government, for various reasons, tried to push away the American involvement, which I think was a mistake.

Young: Yes. I'm interested in his background. Kennedy had a long history. In '72, I think he met John Hume. That was an independent voice. John was a participant.

O'Dowd: That's right.

Young: He had an idea that appealed to Kennedy. Kennedy had given a speech, early.

O'Dowd: After Bloody Sunday, Yes, I remember.

Young: Brits out.

O'Dowd: That's right, yes.

Young: And he was informed, "That's ill advised. That's the wrong way to go." So where did he go? I had the feeling that John Hume got to him on this, but John Hume was not the key person when it came to the visa.

O'Dowd: No, not at all. John had an interesting role to play in Irish America. He was the voice of reason and the voice of nonviolence, and therefore it was easy for John to be accepted by Ted Kennedy and a lot of other people who wanted a safe refuge. But the reality for me was that you had to deal with and challenge the people who were actually at the center of the violence, rather than with John Hume. I knew John and spent time with him, and I was a big fan of the fact that he had spent so many years in this relentless quest.

Young: Sure.

O'Dowd: But I also understood that the real fulcrum of power, in terms of how America could have impact, was not with John but with the IRA. I felt that we were the one group out there that did have standing with them, because they saw America as a sympathetic voice in the main, and when that sympathetic voice confronted them and said, "You're doing something wrong," it was a lot more effective.

We would never publicly criticize them because that didn't work, but the way to talk to them was what we did, I think. That was to get the right people and put some fundamental questions to them. The question I put to Adams was, "Tell me, how are you're going to win this war? How many Brits are you going to kill? At what point do the Brits sail away from the shores and say, 'Well, 15,000 of us have died, that's enough?'"

I didn't see any way out of it and I was quite surprised and glad to find out that Adams shared that perspective, not directly, but the idea that *Yes, of course this is running into the sand, I know that we have to find a different way*. So that was a profound discovery for me.

Young: Right. But Sinn Féin itself, by itself, could not really do anything directly.

O'Dowd: No, that's the point.

Young: They didn't have effective political contacts in the U.S.

O'Dowd: No. They were effectively cornered off. The Brits—one of the British Ministers even referred to them as a terrorist community.

Young: Yes.

O'Dowd: That's how isolated they were, and they needed help to come out of that. John had begun that process with the interaction with Adams, and there were signs. At the time, if you

remember, there was the Middle East Peace Process with [Yitzhak] Rabin, there was South Africa; there was a view that the end of the century was going to see a whole new perspective, and that was really a genuine thing. I know Sinn Féin was deeply influenced by South Africa and by [Nelson] Mandela, and just by the way things were moving.

So there was a time and a tide. I felt that the Irish-American response should be to try and leverage our clout with Sinn Féin, which nobody else had, into something positive, and then to convince Kennedy most of all, and then Clinton, that this was a very hopeful and worthwhile undertaking.

I had numerous discussions with people like Sean O'Huiginn who was, in my opinion, the best diplomat Ireland has ever had in the United States, with Brendan Scannell, and eventually with Albert Reynolds, with whom I had a tremendous relationship, based on the fact that he was a very different kind of Irish politician. He was a businessman and incredibly pragmatic. He understood that if we stopped the violence, everything else could take on a whole new façade.

So it was a very interesting period, because the plates were shifting. It wasn't obvious from the outside, but it still came down to Ted Kennedy in the sense that if Ted had said, "Well, I'm not going to do this because there are terrorists," which was quite a likelihood, it wasn't going to work. That's why I worked very hard on Jean, convincing her that this was a real opening.

Young: This was after she was appointed?

O'Dowd: Yes. I remember when she was just new in the embassy; our visiting her and talking to her about it. It was one of these moments. I think it came down to Tip [Thomas P.] O'Neill's funeral, where Kennedy asked Hume the question, and Jean had worked on Hume and a lot of other people like Sean O'Huiginn had worked on him, and Hume said okay. He wasn't going to object to the idea of Adams.

Young: She worked on Ted, too. [*laughter*]

O'Dowd: Exactly, there you go. Of course, that's your Irish interview.

Young: The visit that Ted and Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] had, at Christmas or in December.

O'Dowd: Yes. I had set up Tim Pat Coogan with Jean, and I think Tim was a great touchstone. At any one stage at that point, it all could have gone wrong. Anyone like Hume could have said no, Jean could have said no, Ted could have said no, and this thing would never have gotten going. Because Clinton was never going to overrule the Kennedy family on the issue of Northern Ireland.

Young: Al Reynolds, then—where did the government of Ireland stand on this?

O'Dowd: Albert Reynolds had told Kennedy that he was in favor of the visa for Gerry Adams. He told him that he was not opposed to it, that he could see it, and that was the beauty of Albert Reynolds. He had this ability to be just utterly pragmatic.

Young: Previously, they—

O'Dowd: They would have opposed it tooth and nail.

Young: Why was that?

O'Dowd: Because they felt that it wasn't their policy. They felt that they controlled the nationalist opinion on Northern Ireland and that the Irish Americans had no right to be sticking their noses in it. What they effectively did was muzzle Ted Kennedy for 30 years, which was completely counterproductive, in my opinion. It had no basis in the reality of what Ted Kennedy could have done, years before, to bring about some kind of similar situation.

Whatever the history books will say, my view was always that nationalist Ireland was at its strongest when Irish America was behind it, and yet for decades, the Irish government directly opposed Irish America, tried to split it and caused a lot of problems for it. That was, I think, a very counterproductive policy. But when they got onto one side, you saw what happened. With Irish America, the Irish government, and Sinn Féin all working towards a common objective, this thing worked.

Young: This is something I hadn't understood really, until I read your book, and this conversation, that the Irish government, Ted was—I think Sean Donlon and other people—

O'Dowd: Yes, they would have a negative view.

Young: And Sean O'Huiginn. He was connected, or they were connected with him.

O'Dowd: They were very connected with Donlon but the change came with Charlie Haughey, when he was elected Prime Minister, around '85 or '87. I went to see Haughey and interviewed him, and he said that his government no longer opposed the MacBride Principles, which was the first chink in the armor.

Young: I see.

O'Dowd: That to me was a very important signal. And then Charlie Haughey did something really important. He appointed really good people in Washington, like Sean O'Huiginn; people who were open to Irish-American intervention in Northern Ireland, the people who were able to deal with the issue of Northern Ireland, were not afraid of it, and were not running away from it because of the violence. It was very easy to say, "We're against violence," but on a practical level, I always knew you had to engage the people who were creating the violence because otherwise, this thing was not going to work. And I think the Irish government, unfortunately, muzzled Ted Kennedy at key periods in this process.

Young: At one point earlier, Sinn Féin and IRA were regarded as one thing, at least in official American opinion.

O'Dowd: Right.

Young: Did that become a problem for you? Were they actually separate? Were you trying to get the political arm involved?

O'Dowd: I never fully understood it. I never fully understood who was who and what was what.

Young: I see.

O'Dowd: But I understood that the people I was talking to were able to effect change, and that was all I worried about. I didn't get into the parsing and analysis, because I think that was one of the favorite pursuits of the media when they had nothing else to do. For me it was irrelevant, because I understood fully there was an army council. I think I know who was on it, but I didn't spend any time worrying about that. The people I was talking to, Gerry Adams and all of them, were clearly in the position to influence and bring about change. And if I could convince them, if our group could convince them, then it would happen. That's effectively how I proceeded.

A lot of this, I think, was my background as a journalist. I just ignored the background noise, went straight to the point and didn't waste a lot of time. I've said to a couple of other people that I literally took people at face value. I just went in and whatever they told me I believed, because I didn't see any point in anyone misleading me, and I didn't see any point in misleading them. And that actually worked out fine.

Young: Yes.

O'Dowd: Particularly Sinn Féin. I would say they were absolutely true to their word, everything they said they would do they did. I learned to have a tremendous admiration for Gerry Adams in particular, in terms of what he was trying to do, which I think was probably one of the single most difficult tasks that any Irish politician ever undertook. It was to put on a political path an armed revolutionary movement which had caused the death of Michael Collins in 1921 and ended in tears on many previous occasions.

Young: It is kind of remarkable that a man on that path did not himself initiate some effort to mobilize the Irish Diaspora.

O'Dowd: I think they were caught in a box. I think that they had—

Young: This is important to understand.

O'Dowd: Yes. They had supporters here but they were too extreme. I was never a member of Noraid, no matter what ever got thrown at me. I was an Irish Nationalist. I didn't believe that beyond—quite frankly, by the mid-'70s, I thought the whole violence thing was completely ridiculous. It was going nowhere. There was no obvious objective to it other than the continuation of it for its own sake.

Young: Yes.

O'Dowd: In the community, you got tagged very quickly with labels and I got tagged as pro-Sinn Féin. In the end, I turned that to my advantage in the sense that my newspaper was a powerful voice for me. I had spent a lot of time trying to de-demonize Sinn Féin and saying, "Hang on, let's deal with this as a political problem rather than as an issue where all we can do is condemn violence and say, 'Isn't this terrible.'"

I think my bona fides then with Adams were pretty good, when I went to him. I had stood out and said things when a lot of other Irish Americans were either running away from them or were caught up in some other issue. So from that point of view, I think Adams and I got on very well.

Young: Well, it certainly must have opened an opportunity for him that he didn't have before. He was on this path.

O'Dowd: Yes, he was on the path.

Young: That crucial element was missing.

O'Dowd: The train had left and we just happened aboard. We weren't aware of all the other machinations and intrigue; we just kept to our part of it. I had a great group of people with me, businessmen and pragmatic people who really had a sense of the issue from the point of view of solving a problem. American can-do, it's a great thing in this country.

I always felt that the Irish admired the problem and said, "It's so difficult, nobody can solve it." Whereas the American attitude, like when George Mitchell got there, was, "Okay, what do we need to do? Let's just do what we have to do." I think that pragmatism is pretty good in any peace process. You have the view that you can't think of the past or the future, you've got to think of today and how you actually leverage something, and I think that's how things were.

Young: At what point did Kennedy get on the train, and how did that happen?

O'Dowd: He got on the train the day that John Hume and Jean gave him the go-ahead, basically. I think from that point on he was on the train. I still hadn't spoken to him about it. Even though I had spoken to him previously many times about immigration, I never discussed Northern Ireland with him, because I knew he would bring it up when he wanted to talk about it. I continued to work through Trina Vargo and through Nancy Soderberg.

They all wanted deniability of what we were doing, which I understood fully, but the moment that I actually heard directly from Ted Kennedy was the night before the visa was granted, when this huge issue came up.

Young: With the grenades?

O'Dowd: Yes. That was obviously a British dirty trick in San Diego. He called me at home and I knew then that this thing was really in motion. He was deeply upset about what had happened and wanted to know what I thought. I told him that it was clearly a setup, I had never heard of such a group and it was a complete waste of time to worry about it. So that was quite a dramatic conversation.

I know that fundamentally, without Ted Kennedy, there would never have been a visa, and Gerry Adams will tell you that without a visa, there would have never been a ceasefire. You put two and two together, and Kennedy was the key architect, in many ways more than Clinton, on that particular issue. Later, Clinton really got involved in the talks, but on the issue of the very first step, which was the visa, Kennedy was the critical person.

Young: After O'Neill's funeral.

O'Dowd: Right.

Young: This was shortly after he returned from a visit with Jean, which I think was critical for him. In fact, he said so.

O'Dowd: Yes. [*laughter*]

Young: He went over there.

O'Dowd: Yes, I know.

Young: And when he saw the schedule, he was over there on a social visit.

O'Dowd: That's right, I know. That was a fascinating time. Tim Pat Coogan talks pretty strongly about the day he arrived at his house and they sat down and discussed all this.

Young: And he did a number of—there were all kinds of ups and downs, weren't there?

O'Dowd: Yes.

Young: "Oh, the President is leaning this way."

O'Dowd: Yes, that's right.

Young: So how did you, from the outside, get any sense of that, of what was really going on inside the halls of power?

O'Dowd: Well, I was speaking with Nancy Soderberg at that point and Trina Vargo, and they were my only ways of really trying to figure out what was happening. Again, when you're in the middle of a storm you just keep focused on the things that you can do. That's as much as you can do.

One way I was influential that I am very proud of was a *New York Times* editorial saying a visa should be given, which came at an absolutely critical moment. I had worked very hard on that and on putting full-page ads in the *New York Times* about the issue, for which Bill Flynn had raised the money. So I was doing whatever I could. Whatever machinations were going on, Sean O'Huiginn kept me in touch, and Brendan Scannell, though I wasn't in the room for any of those discussions. But I think we'd laid out a deeply compelling argument.

Young: It's hard to figure out at just what point all of the pulling and hauling was just so much noise. I still can't figure it out. We've interviewed Soderberg and Trina, but you get people who are very close inside the government saying, "Oh, somebody's got to him here and somebody's got to him there." After a while, as Ted himself said, he was very angry and he called up Tony Lake.

O'Dowd: Yes, that's right.

Young: He said this has gotten to the point of ridiculousness. And then he really did pull out the guns, his own political guns.

O'Dowd: I think he did.

Young: Oh, yes.

O'Dowd: There's no question in my mind about that. He delivered that visa and I think in a strange way, the action in San Diego may have made him even more determined on that.

Young: I think in his mind that was the point at which it just got absurd.

O'Dowd: Covers it.

Young: "To have to respond to this and then I'll put a new condition on."

O'Dowd: Yes. I had to call up Adams in the middle of the night and condemn an incident that he knew absolutely nothing about and was not connected with.

By all accounts, that's how Clinton made decisions. He would go back and forth constantly and leave people in a state of flux as to where his mind really was. Tony Lake—obviously, the National Security Council people bought into the visa idea and I think they were critical as well. But as to the moment, I just don't know. I know that there were loud voices from Tom Foley and people like that, saying, "Don't do it."

I think the fact that Clinton was an outsider helped a lot, that he wasn't a creature of the establishment. I noticed that about him subsequently. He would say things and people would miss what he was saying, but I would take him very seriously because he was a guy who didn't necessarily recognize accepted wisdom. I think that was deeply important on the issue of Northern Ireland. He just wasn't snowed under by the FBI or whoever, coming to him saying, "These people are terrorists, they could blow up something." He had his own sense of being an outsider and saw what the chess move could be for Sinn Féin and how it could work out for himself, as well.

In that sense, he was the purest politician next to Kennedy I'd ever met, because he was capable of that kind of thought. We would never have had a hope with George Bush, either of them, to have that independence from the bureaucracy, because it's so much easier to say no to any of these things. I think getting someone to say yes is a tough deal.

Young: Kennedy stayed in—after he did the visa. Could you talk a little bit about his interventions after the visa storm was over? First, there was just a 48-hour visa.

O'Dowd: That's right.

Young: Would you say that was only getting to first base, or was it even that far?

O'Dowd: I actually think it broke the mold. It was a profound moment. It was the overturning of 200 years of acceptance that the British government policy on Northern Ireland was the right

one. I think it was actually huge, and I think the British establishment saw it that way. If you look at the IRA's reaction, you know.

The most wonderful moment for me was seeing Gerry Adams on *Larry King*, and the transmission being blocked from going into Britain, the mother of parliaments, because it just showed Americans and British people how insane this whole thing actually was. Almost even more than the IRA ceasefire, from the American perspective, the moment that the intervention happened was profoundly important, in my opinion. And Kennedy had a huge role in that.

If you look at the situation now and look around Congress, there's nobody at all who would have that stature, to dictate to the President of the United States how a policy should be done.

Young: Well, he did it by not dictating.

O'Dowd: Of course. But effectively, it was a clever moment. I spent hours and hours on the phone, and the biggest problem was trying to interpret Sinn Féin for the White House and interpret the White House for Sinn Féin. They both spoke English but it was a completely different language. On the one hand you were dealing with an army, and on the other, dealing with this quicksilver political figure whose words didn't mean anything five minutes later, but who had a general sense of direction. At Sinn Féin, they wanted stuff done in regimented lines: this is what's going to happen, A, B, C, D. That's how an army thinks and it was an interesting contrast. I ended up interpreting, more than anything, between the two, trying to figure out what one person or group was trying to say to the other.

Young: The fundamental problem on the American side was establishing the recognition that they were not being played.

O'Dowd: Yes, exactly.

Young: By Adams, whom they didn't know. And so it might be called a credibility problem.

O'Dowd: That's right.

Young: So how could they judge?

O'Dowd: They couldn't.

Young: And then things would happen, a bomb would go off.

O'Dowd: And I would get the brunt of all that. I'd get a call. People would say—Trina would call on behalf of Kennedy—"What the hell is going on?" "Have you guys seen this?" And I'd say, "Look, I know this is a strange game, but they have to show they're in a position of strength when they call the ceasefire."

That was my belief about this ridiculous thing they did around St. Patrick's Day, with bombs at Heathrow Airport, which were really dummy bombs. There was some crazy stuff going on in the Republican movement. It was a real period of self-start as well, in the sense of, *now, do I know*

these guys? Am I interpreting what they're saying and doing? Because they would never tell me directly what they were doing.

Young: Yes.

O'Dowd: But they would leave it to me to explain what I was doing, what I was telling the White House about why things were happening. It was a difficult period, and to this day, I do not understand. What really strikes me in retrospect is just how tone-deaf Sinn Féin was about what it meant to have an American President involved. Just how profound that was, and how silly it was to play these little games of planting dummy bombs, or whatever.

That was the problem with Sinn Féin, that the internal argument was always the critical one. It didn't matter about watching the world. It was, "How do I, Gerry Adams, move from a position of 90 percent support to 98 percent?" That's all he was worried about. He wanted everybody with him, as far as he could get them, and that was his whole way of allowing the IRA to do some of these things. Just to retain that sense that they needed of their own importance in the issue. There were long periods when I would have these blistering conversations with Tony Lake or Trina Vargo or Soderberg as to what the hell was going on.

I placed my faith in Adams completely. I had seen enough of the guy in action and had sat down with him long enough to understand what he was trying to do, and that was what I just kept batting back. That Adams knew what he was doing.

Young: The issues following the first visa, and then he came again, and got another visa.

O'Dowd: Right.

Young: He came again that same year, I think in 1994, but on the occasion of these successive visits to this country, he was still not accepted.

O'Dowd: No.

Young: He wasn't allowed to—I know on some occasions, Ted wouldn't meet with him.

O'Dowd: That's right, which I think was a mistake.

I have to tell you a wonderful personal thing, which was the day of the announcement of the ceasefire, one of the happiest days of my life. Ted called me. I was at a hotel in Dublin and this was before cell phones. The hotel public-address system said, "Mr. O'Dowd, Senator Kennedy, line two." And the whole hotel just kind of erupted. It was just this amazing moment. I got on the line with him and honestly, I can't say I knew the man that well, but I never heard him so happy or so fulfilled or so justified as the day the IRA called the ceasefire.

I know he had felt the heat and that [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan and various other people had been after him, saying he did the wrong thing. This was a complete vindication and I knew that that day that the war was over. I knew there would be huge hiccups and I didn't quite know the ceasefire would fall apart, in fairness. But I felt that was the moment that the Rubicon was

crossed and Kennedy was totally aware of that. He was a very astute guy and he understood exactly the importance of it.

Young: You said you thought it was a mistake for him to do this.

O'Dowd: Yes, I did.

Young: I did not talk with him about those details, but he took a lot of hits, too.

O'Dowd: He did.

Young: For this. And whenever the headlines showed violence, he had to say something.

O'Dowd: That's right.

Young: And one of the ways he would say it—this is my interpretation—would be, he was not going to see Adams on this trip.

O'Dowd: Yes. I was there in Boston when Adams came the first time.

Young: He and Vicki met him at the airport.

O'Dowd: That's right, yes. I think I went on the campaign trail with Ted Kennedy at that time.

Young: He was involved in it.

O'Dowd: He was in it with [Mitt] Romney, but I also remember on the campaign trail, I was with him for a day, and it was just incredible to go around Boston with him. He was like every old Irish politician I knew. He knew everybody; the doormen, the guys in the elevators. We'd go into a restaurant, he knew—it was retail politics, and I saw the man in his element.

Young: Boy, he loved it.

O'Dowd: Oh, absolutely. He'd just grab people and there was a constant stream, like a procession. I'd never seen a politician like him. I said to him afterward, "You're going to win this race because nobody can match you. This guy—I don't care what it says in the polls, he's not going to match this kind of stuff. There's love for you out there, a very profound love."

That day was just one of the best days of my life, because it filled me with awe, that this guy was so natural and so talented at his job.

I was very naïve about a lot of things about the Brits. I thought once the ceasefire happened that they would embrace it, and I was on the *Today Show* the next day and the Secretary of State said, "Well, he didn't say the word 'permanent.'" I was just amazed. Amazed that they were getting this incredible gift horse and they were going spit in its mouth, you know? It nearly drove me crazy, that they didn't just grab it. And they should have, because it caused all kinds of huge, profound problems subsequently. Again, it was the establishment of Britain who were unwilling and unable to let go of the certainties that they had built up for 30 years about this conflict.

Kennedy got caught up in some of that stuff and I disagreed strongly with Trina Vargo, because I think she was directing what Kennedy was doing in terms of, "Well, we can't talk to him this time because he didn't do this or he didn't do that." And I said, "That's not the issue. The issue is to look at what's happening here. We've ended it on this war of the twentieth century in Europe. This guy needs space, he needs time and he needs support. You don't cut the support away from him." And unfortunately, on a few occasions, I think Kennedy made mistakes on those kinds of things.

Young: But in the end—

O'Dowd: In the end he was totally there.

Young: Kennedy has quite a reputation for good staff.

O'Dowd: Yes, he does, and rightly so.

Young: He is just revered by his staff.

O'Dowd: Carey Parker was with him for how long, 35 years?

Young: Oh, yes.

Young: Trina, I think, was playing the part of protecting—in part, protecting.

O'Dowd: Yes, that's true.

Young: Protecting him from any possible—you know?

O'Dowd: Yes, that's true. There was a lot of—

Young: But he was very instrumental in getting the White House to drop the, "You can't do any funding, can't travel."

O'Dowd: It was all ridiculous stuff. But when you meet a pure politician, they're a great breed. Clinton is the same. They see the moves on the chess board and they move, and the staffers can't see the moves but they really can. That's the difference for me. I heard Clinton say things in the White House, at press conferences when he'd be asked about the IRA. The staff would be freaking out about what he said, but to me it was just the perfect political response.

Kennedy was the same. When you actually got to Kennedy himself and talked to him, he'd get it like that [*snaps fingers*]. But the staff, you're right, they had this protective zone. That's understandable, too, but they had never been in that position where they had to make the decision.

Young: Can you say anything about Kennedy's role leading up to the Good Friday Agreement, or were you sort of out of it by then?

O'Dowd: I made a pretty immediate decision, once the second IRA ceasefire was restored, that that was as much as I could do. I think I was one of the first people to meet with George Mitchell

and I told him everything I knew, but from that point on, while I kept in touch and occasionally interacted with Kennedy's staff and Kennedy himself, I wasn't playing a role. My role was essentially from 1990 to 1995. That was it. And then I subsequently got involved with Kennedy again over the immigration issue.

Young: Which was a great frustration for him.

O'Dowd: A great frustration. And a great frustration for me. [*laughter*]

Young: And a lot of others.

O'Dowd: The one time I learned—I founded an organization called the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, and we used to go to Washington and we'd have two or three thousand people, and Teddy would come and address us. What a force of nature. The one thing you don't want to be is the guy who is the warm-up speaker for Ted Kennedy, [*laughter*] which I was, because he would come in and just take over. He loved it. He was a natural politician, born to it.

We had some frustrating times with that issue, when he thought he had it and then it slipped away. It's sad, actually, because like so many of the things in this country, without him it hasn't any chance, in my opinion.

Young: Talk a little bit about Jean. I interviewed her several times. In fact, I'm seeing her today. I'm just paying a visit to her.

O'Dowd: I was with her on Monday night. We were at a farewell party for Chris Dodd and Vicki was there. It was a very nice occasion.

Young: Was Jean's appointment a surprise to you?

O'Dowd: It was, yes. Again, as the editor of the top Irish newspaper, you think you know everything, and I knew nothing about it.

Young: You didn't get a hint that this was in the wind?

O'Dowd: No.

Young: And it happened very early. He was on to Clinton about this right after the election.

O'Dowd: Right after it, yes. I'd love to read the real history of that, because as far as I know, the word was that it was going to be Brian Donnelly, the former Congressman from Massachusetts. But then out of the blue, Teddy put his oar in the water and that was it.

Jean had the great ability to make her mind up very decisively, which in an Ambassador is a rare thing. She made the decision on Adams. She got blamed because she wasn't smart enough or hadn't spent long enough. And you know what? She went with her gut and I saw her do it numerous times, and 90 percent of the time she was as determined as Teddy. If she felt she was right, she just went for it, and that ability to make her mind up quickly was critical with the Adams visa, in particular.

So I have nothing but praise for her time in Dublin. I knew she had a huge problem with the internal dynamics of the embassy and that got pretty vicious. And she stood up to them. Very few of us would have had the balls to do what she did, which was to ignore the advice of all her experts and go with her gut on the issues. I have an awful lot of admiration for her for that.

Young: She again was a novice.

O'Dowd: Yes, totally.

Young: Which was probably an asset.

O'Dowd: I often wonder. I didn't know the Kennedy women that well, but I often wonder if she had run for politics, how good she would have been. I think she would have been great, because she had that warmth and that Kennedy touch. Obviously, it wasn't a done thing back then, but it's one of those big questions, how she would have done.

I see Vicki the same way. I think she would be a remarkable politician; very warm, a very personable person. But Jean—once she was let loose in this role, she was brilliant. She had never been in an overtly political role in her life and suddenly she was, and she was very, very good at it.

Young: I think she must have been a pretty good judge of people.

O'Dowd: She was instinctive. She made decisions very quickly.

Young: She connected up, I think very soon, with Sean O'Huiginn.

O'Dowd: Sean O'Huiginn, Tim Pat Coogan, people like that, who just pulled her out. And she just went with it. That's not an easy thing to do. She had great confidence in her ability to make a choice. It would have been so easy to go to Dublin, like all these Ambassadors do, and leave the heavy lifting to the tsars or the pharaoh, or whoever, and then just do the glad-handing side. But she jumped right in on a very senior level, on the biggest policy issue between the two countries, and she got it right. I think it's a great credit to her.

Young: And she certainly wasn't just a mouthpiece for Ted Kennedy.

O'Dowd: Oh, no.

Young: She was quite independent.

O'Dowd: Yes. I have seen her be quite strong with people. If she felt something was wrong, she had no problem at all about it. At my first meeting with her in the Embassy in Dublin, I was concerned because she said very little. But I understood subsequently, of course that would have been the case, or why would she have?

Young: It must have been the summer.

O'Dowd: That's right, yes.

Young: She arrived in July.

O'Dowd: That's right, it was that summer. We went over in September.

Young: She hadn't gotten herself—

O'Dowd: She hadn't gotten her feet under the table yet. She deservedly should take a lot of credit. It's funny, you look back on it now and everybody says, "It was all inevitable." It wasn't inevitable at all, it's just that people like her and people like Teddy stood up.

They had every reason not to stand up. It wasn't their direct concern, it wasn't something that—Clinton was the same way. It all fell together in a very fortuitous way. The one thing the Irish peace process had that the Middle East didn't was that it was lucky. Ted Kennedy, Jean Kennedy, George Mitchell—at key moments, it found people who were very determined and very committed to the cause. And it just so happened that they happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Albert Reynolds is another one who I think was a tremendous leader.

Young: I asked Ted in one of our interviews whether it was as some people talk about it, as a model for the lessons learned. I think there are a lot of lessons that could be learned about this that haven't been. But the question is whether it's applicable to the Middle East.

O'Dowd: Right.

Young: Ted said exactly what you said. He said, "I don't see the responsible leaders," and he went through the list.

O'Dowd: [Yasser] Arafat was—

Young: He put Ian Paisley on the list and he put Gerry Adams on the list of people who were dedicated to doing something about it, but who are not doing something about it. But they were at least responsible leaders who took responsible positions.

O'Dowd: If Arafat had taken the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization] with him, like Adams took the IRA with him, at the end of Clinton's term, you would have had a peace settlement. And that was the difference.

I agree with you, the lessons are many, but the main one is that people have to take that responsibility, and I haven't seen it. Certainly not with [Benjamin] Netanyahu and, I don't think, on the Arab side. I was speaking to a group of Jewish leaders in London about a month ago, and they asked me to talk about this very thing. I said that from my point of view, unless you address the issue of Hamas, you will never solve the Middle East. In the same way, unless you address the issue of the IRA, you'll never—and all this nonsense is going on.

These are elected people. Sinn Féin was elected. You have to address them and I said, "That's the main similarity I see. As long as you have Hamas outside the door brandishing guns, you're not going to get anywhere. You simply have to address that issue."

That's the only lesson that I would continue to draw from Northern Ireland, addressing the central issue of how do you stop violence? Until you stop violence, you can't have a peace process. I think that's really the key to Ireland.

Young: No ceasefire seems to hold.

O'Dowd: No, it doesn't, because the center falls apart. The extremes pull at the center and it comes apart.

You're right. If you look at the different players right now in the Middle East, quite honestly, I fear the moment has passed. It passed with Rabin. His assassination was the critical moment, I think. He had the power and he had the vision to do it.

Young: And the will.

O'Dowd: Yes, exactly.

Young: I guess our time is up. Thank you very much.

O'Dowd: Not at all, it's been a pleasure.