

Transcript of Ken Reid interview with the Prime Minister - 12/9/97

KR - Prime Minister after yesterday's *Republican News* article, what does the government believe is the relationship between SF and the IRA?

PM - We have always believed that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked. That's why when Sinn Fein sign up to the Mitchell principles, as they have done, which means that they are committed to the non-violent democratic path in negotiations, we must hold them to that commitment and we must make sure that that commitment is satisfied.

KR - But you understand the concerns, that if these negotiations do not go the right way for the Republican movement, then they will bring the gun back in to politics?

PM - Well I do understand the concerns of people and that's precisely the reason why I take the opportunity to make it again clear that the Mitchell principles will be adhered to; we will expect everyone to adhere to them and if they are not adhered to, then any Party, whoever they are, that is not adhering to them and is breaking their word, will be out of the Talks.

KR - Will you be asking SF if they represent the IRA?

PM - Well we have always made it clear that we believe that they are inextricably linked, so any idea that they can get out of their commitment by somehow saying it's nothing to do with them, well it won't wash with us at all.

KR - Now, there has been some confusion about consent. What is your understanding of consent?

PM - My understanding of consent is very direct and very simple; that there can be no change and must be no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of people in Northern Ireland. And furthermore, this applies also to the process of negotiation, so that the safeguards that are ~~there~~ the triple-lock if you like, that any arrangements that are reached must be arrangements that are adhered to by the parties, by the parliament and by the people.

KR - And you say the principle of consent will apply right through the negotiations?

PM - Yes and I think it should be a guiding principle of the negotiations. I think that is all very important as it is all part of building confidence with people, that we can get a lasting political settlement, that is a democratic, lasting political settlement.

KR - There are also obvious worries about decommissioning. Now I know you have set up various bodies to look after that area, but in all honesty are there going to be guns handed over during the time of negotiations?

PM - The document that we have agreed with the Irish government is in essence the document which the previous British government had negotiated with them, and what we are trying to do is not to set up preconditions or obstacles, but ensure we do get decommissioning as quickly as possible. You know, my own view is that decommissioning should happen now. I do not believe there is any justification for any illegally held weapons to be there at all. We have set up this process and we expect all Parties to be there in good faith. And we will say for our part that we want to see actual decommissioning during the process of negotiations.

KR - The IRA say in their article that the handover of guns is tantamount to surrender.

PM - Well I don't believe that to be true at all. I think what is important is that we try and give people the very best chance to start negotiating on the substance of a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland. The most frustrating thing about this process is that there is a substantial measure of agreement both that there needs to be some form of relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and there needs to be a system of devolution of power in NI itself. And what I would like to do is to get on and discuss those cross border arrangements and the devolved assembly, the substance of negotiations, so that we can put in place that lasting settlement, get it agreed by the people and then start a situation in Northern Ireland where politics becomes about the things politics should be about - the schools, the hospitals, the primarys, jobs for people, rather than what it has been about.

KR - Now tomorrow morning, the Unionist Party have a very important decision to take regarding the Talks on Monday. What would you say to the Unionists this evening?

PM - Well I don't want to presume or intrude upon their discussions in any way that is unhelpful at all. What I would simply say is that, there are all sorts of extremists in this situation who want to wreck this process because they don't really want a settlement. I think that decent moderate people, that huge majority of people in Northern Ireland want to see a situation where the Unionist concerns are represented very directly in the Talks, where Sinn Fein are confronted with the arguments, and my firm conviction is that it better that people are in there arguing their case on the firm understanding that the agreements in relation to Mitchell and non-violence will be enforced by the governments. It is better to be in that process than outside it.

KR - Looking ahead to next May you are still determined that a referendum will take place.

PM - I want that to happen. I desperately want that to happen because I think we are in a situation where there is the potential for hope, but what I have learnt about this situation in just these few months of government is that if it isn't moved forward it slides backwards and I desperately want it to move forward.

KR - Can I ask you one final question do you intend meeting Gerry Adams in the near future?

PM - Well, no decisions have been taken on that at all Ken, but decisions will be taken in the future.