

23-10 36
Joe Blyden
What was actually said

POSSIBLE SUPPLEMENTARIES

Question 1

If the IRA were to call a ceasefire today, would Sinn Féin be permitted to participate in the multi-party talks tomorrow? Will a timeframe apply?

Question 2

The Taoiseach said in the Dáil on 17 October that: 'The first requirement [for Sinn Féin] is a ceasefire. There is a requirement to establish that that ceasefire is a credible one and not tactical'. Surely, this implies a time-lag between a ceasefire and Sinn Féin's entry into negotiations?

Reply

- Paragraph 5 of the 28 February Joint Communiqué includes the following: 'Both Governments are agreed that the resumption of Ministerial dialogue with Sinn Féin and their participation in negotiations requires the restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994'
- Paragraph 8 of the Ground Rules Paper refers to the need for parties to 'establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process's.
- Paragraph 9 states that 'both Governments are agreed that the resumption of Ministerial dialogue with Sinn Féin, and their participation in negotiations, requires the unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994'.
- * - I have repeatedly said, addressing myself to the Republican movement, in this House and elsewhere, that a restored ceasefire must be credible, must not be purely tactical and must hold in all circumstances.
- I have said that it is for the Republican movement to find the words and the means to convince the rest of us as to 'credibility'. And I have said that the series of bombings, atrocities and other paramilitary actions over the past nine months have made that a more difficult task.
- But I have deliberately refrained from laying down any period or time-lag between a ceasefire and Sinn Féin's entry into negotiations. Similarly, I did not specify any additional test they would have to pass in terms of specific behaviour.
- As I have said, it is a question of belief - Do we believe that they are genuinely committed to democracy and non-violence on an enduring basis?

- As Prime Minister Major and I did in our 28 February Communiqué, I again call upon Sinn Féin and the IRA to make Sinn Féin's participation in the process of meaningful negotiations possible. The IRA must announce an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994 and they must show the rest of us that they abide by the democratic process.

If pressed in regard to statements by Secretary Mayhew, Prime Minister Major or the Tánaiste's interview on Morning Ireland on 23 October when he said: 'I would say a matter of weeks, if at all. And are we going to allow a matter of weeks one way or the other to bring the whole process to a standstill'.

- I previously resisted attempts by Deputy Ahern to go beyond the 28 February Communiqué by specifying in this House a time-lag.
- I continue to believe that this is not a fruitful way to proceed.

Question 3

In view of the slow progress in the multi-party talks, the arrests and arms discovery in Donegal, the Lisburn atrocity and other indicators, does the Taoiseach not accept that a restoration of the IRA ceasefire is now a forlorn hope?

Reply

- I am happy to take this opportunity to congratulate the Gardaí on their vigilance and on their effective action in County Donegal, following on their earlier effective operation at Hackballscross.
- These seizures and arrests clearly demonstrate that the seizure of illegally-held weapons is, and will remain, a top priority for the Gardaí. The full resources of the State will continue to be used to suppress terrorism in any part of this island.
- I have said previously in the House that, regrettably, much of what we have seen in recent months does not give grounds for encouragement as to a restoration of the IRA ceasefire. That said, it is clear that a debate continues within the Republican movement.
- I can only repeat what was said in my statement on 2 October when I endorsed the comment by His Eminence, Cardinal Cahal Daly:
'Political arguments are compellingly in favour of the IRA restoring their

ceasefire in order to allow Sinn Féin to enter the talks process. No single thing would do more at this time to restore hope and to lessen hate and division in our society than a restoration of the IRA ceasefire'.

That comment remains fully valid today.

- The Government have done everything possible, and continue to do so, to facilitate Sinn Féin's participation in a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations.
- We have ensured that the arrangements for the talks at Stormont provide for such a process on the basis of a comprehensive agenda, where any participant can raise any matter it considers relevant, where no outcome is either predetermined or precluded in advance, and where participation in the negotiations is without prejudice to any participant's commitment to the achievement by exclusively peaceful and democratic means of its preferred options.
- In the talks process, the Irish Government delegation have ensured that decommissioning will be seriously tackled but without blocking other aspects of the negotiations.
- We want these talks to be fully inclusive and to proceed in a totally peaceful atmosphere. But if the Republican movement decide to exclude themselves from participation, the talks will go ahead without them.

Question 4

Would the Taoiseach not accept that the British Prime Minister and himself should meet soon to (a) try and inject momentum into the Belfast talks, and (b) to clarify definitively the joint British/Irish Government position on Sinn Féin's entry into negotiations?

Reply

- As I said in this House on 16 October, an Anglo-Irish Summit will take place whenever such a move, in the judgement of the British Prime Minister and myself, would be of most benefit.
- In the meantime, as I have previously indicated, contacts between the two Governments - including with 10 Downing Street - are at an unprecedented level of frequency. On Friday last, I had the opportunity for a discussion with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he paid a courtesy call on me when in Dublin on other business.

- I had a telephone conversation with the Prime Minister on Saturday. I do not intend to go into the specifics of such conversations. But in it we had a full exchange of views on the talks and a possible ceasefire.
- The Government lose no opportunity to inject momentum into the talks process, as I have previously documented in the House. [We believe that a greater dynamic could be given to the negotiations through agreement among the participants on a calendar and timeframe which they would seek to achieve and the Government will be seeking to pursue this aim in the talks in the period ahead.]

QUESTION 5

Within what timeframe would the Taoiseach wish to see the multi-party talks concluded?

REPLY

- I have set out on previous occasions the Government's position on this matter.
- The relevant British legislation provides for negotiations over a period of up to one year, with the option of a second year. However, as I indicated in my speech at Finglas on 30 April, there may be value in aiming for a more concentrated timeframe than that, without of course placing undue pressure on any of the participants.

QUESTION 6

Would the Taoiseach not agree that an extraordinary meeting of the Forum should be held?

REPLY

- That is a matter for the parties at the Forum to decide.
- The Deputy, I am sure, will be aware of the contents of the Statement issued on 29 March:
'Reflecting the preponderant view, she [the Forum Chairperson] concluded that all meetings of the Forum are deferred until a basis has been restored on which, consistent with its terms of reference and the basis on which it was established, the Forum could agree to meet in a fully inclusive format'.
- I do not have anything to add to that.

QUESTION 7

Would the Taoiseach not agree that the Forum should now be disbanded?

REPLY

- I do not believe that this would be the proper course to take at present.
- As I said in my reply, the primary axis for now is the multi-party talks.
- However, it is conceivable that in certain circumstances and of course following a restoration of the IRA ceasefire, there could be some limited role for the Forum. I would have to add that I have no particular view as to what that role might be.
- I am simply saying that it could be premature to dissolve the Forum.