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INSIDE POLITICS: SATURDAY 3 AUGUST 1996
SIR PATRICK MAYHEW, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NI

file
 605/8

Deirdre Devlin

With the political talks now in summer recess all eyes will be turned to Londonderry awaiting the outcome of negotiations for the Apprentice Boys' march. Both Governments say they're satisfied with the outcome of the multi-party talks at Stormont. Monday's plenary session failed to secure agreement on an agenda but those taking part did reach consensus on the rules and procedures and selected a business committee. The main sticking point of decommissioning remains however. After the talks broke up the Secretary of State said he was pleased some modest progress had been made. Sir Patrick has been heavily criticised over the past few weeks about comments he made following the Drumore stand-off when he said people should cheer up and not be so gloomy. When I spoke to him yesterday I first asked him if he regretted what he had said.

(Mayhew upset
 on the need to
 find a way tho'
 on 1) marches
 2) talks.)

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I advised Peter Snow, who was interviewing me, to cheer up. He needed to be advised that. I'm glad to see you don't.

Deirdre Devlin

Now the Chief Constable is adamant that he made the decision that there was no influence from you, but surely people will find it incredible considering the seriousness of the situation that you didn't give at least some advice on the matter?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I don't mind whether they found it incredible or not. The Chief Constable said exactly what happened and that's something that I agree with.

Deirdre Devlin

But there was irreparable damage done to the RUC at that time. Should something not have been done about that?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I think that it's perfectly true that enormous damage was done to Northern Ireland let alone the RUC or any other body within Northern Ireland, huge damage done at a time when so much progress had been made in improving our image, in getting inward investment, in getting unemployment down, getting the jobs up. And tourism of course enormously affected. So, yes, huge damage was done. I think that the encouraging thing is that people wide and far, near and far, have realised this and I believe they have drawn the right lesson from it.

Deirdre Devlin

But people now are more polarised than at any other time in recent history. We witnessed the scenes at the time with plastic bullets fired, roads blocked, buildings destroyed. Shouldn't you take some responsibility for not intervening?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well I think you have to ask yourself whether people would have more confidence if Ministers were able to say: "Oh, my political opponent's having a march next week, I'll soon stop that because I have the decision in these matters". I don't think they'd like that. I think the right thing to do is, as we have it in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, that these are not political decisions. They're taken by a Chief Constable or another senior police officer on the basis of public order. However, there are two views about that and that's why I have appointed a Body to review the whole question under Dr Peter North, to review the whole question of these marches and parades which are deeply rooted here in the history and culture of Northern Ireland. I think there's time for a firmly independent review and we wait to see what those recommendations are. I have asked for them by the end of January.

Deirdre Devlin

How can an independent Body hope to have success where everything else has failed?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well, if you're not careful I shall have to say cheer up. We have got a very distinguished lawyer who has plenty of experience of public service and of public matters. He's also somebody of great academic distinction, he's Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University and I think that if he is reinforced by two people with widely representative background here in Northern Ireland, I think there's a very good chance that we will have a very beneficial, independent view and then we'll see where we get to. Let's not sort of give it a thumbs down straightaway before they have even started work.

Deirdre Devlin

If we can look now to events on August 10th - at the moment there's no sign of a resolution. The Apprentice Boys want to walk their traditional route round the City's walls and the Nationalists want to stop them. Now the situation could potentially be the same as it was at Drumcree. Didn't you send out a dangerous message when you spoke after Drumcree that the strength of numbers could overwhelm the RUC and this could happen again?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well, I was asked whether I could guarantee that it would never happen again. I of course had to say 'No'. I can't give a guarantee about that. If I had said 'Yes, I can guarantee it', you'd be asking me the question - how can you guarantee it, how can you make certain that there won't be enormous, overwhelming force? So I answer the question, which was a proper question, in the only open and honest way that was available to me. Let's face the facts. Equally, let us face the fact that if in a democracy a police force, a police service, which represents the public and is there to protect the public is overwhelmed by masses of people we are facing a very serious challenge to democracy itself and I think that's the lesson of course of Drumcree and an awful lot of people have learnt it. Now there's one thing which is very different

in today's situation and the situation about the Apprentice Boys' intended march and it is this that the two sides are talking, the Apprentice Boys are talking with the Bogside Residents Association. They have had two meetings already. I understand this to be a third. That is something which was lacking in Drumcree and Portadown, something which was very necessary there.

Deirdre Devlin

Are you optimistic that some resolution will be found before next Saturday?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I'm obviously hopeful that people with the future of that lovely city in their minds - and I'm sure both sides have it in their minds - will reach an accommodation. Nobody wants to see that city, whose future has been improved so greatly in recent years, so much inward investment, so much new housing, so much new tourism, nobody wants to see that thrown away, as indeed it would, nor I think do they want to see hundreds of thousands, millions of pounds having to go in compensation for damage caused in disorder and riots, rather than on schools, on hospitals, on roads, all the things that we want, and that's what will happen. Already £20 million is going to have to be spent by the Compensation Agency. No more money's going to come from the Treasury for Northern Ireland. That's going to come out of other things that are desperately needed.

Deirdre Devlin

Is there not an incentive now though for people who believe in mob rule that they will get their way if they bring in large enough numbers?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

It depends what they really want. If people have no concern for the future of Northern Ireland, no concern for the future of their fellow citizens, no concern for whether there are hospitals, schools, roads, no concern for whether the environment is improved by the necessary money being spent, well then, I daresay, they'll say "well, let's go and do as much damage as we can". But they will be self-confessed as having no concern for those things if they do.

Deirdre Devlin

I would suggest to you, Secretary of State, that the concern for hospitals and education would be uppermost in the minds of people who believe that their cultural way of life will be undermined and that the Union is no longer safe and they see that as being epitomised in the right to march?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

And you say the Union is no longer safe. You're not going to draw me into a discussion about the merits, the advantages, and disadvantages of what is proposed as a traditional march. I'm not going to get into that. The people who live there are talking together and I applaud that and I think we all ought to applaud it. Everybody recognises that the RUC and the Chief Constable at their head has a duty to protect the public and to protect the rights of people. Sometimes people's rights conflict, the right to march against the right to

protest peacefully, but in a civilized and grown-up society, which of course we are, these things are balanced much more often than they aren't. Last year I think there were 3,000 marches of which only 13 caused any trouble. Surely there's a lesson there? The reason is that in the other 3,000 people came to a local balance, a local agreement and that's what all of us, everybody, has got to be encouraging.

Deirdre Devlin

During the ceasefires - you mentioned the RUC there - during the ceasefires there were a lot of ground made up with police as regards the nationalist community. There's perception now among some of the nationalist community about the partiality of the police. How difficult do you think it will be for them to get that credibility back within.....?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well I have to say to you, so that I get both sides of this, I have had Unionists complaining to me fiercely that the RUC were very heavy-handed against Unionists in certain places. Now I don't know what the facts are: in each instance I've had figures given to me, the number of petrol-bombs that were thrown at the RUC by one group compared with the other. I'm not going to get into that now. All I would invite people to just reflect upon is that when you have civil disorder, when you have riots of the scale that we had, first of all it's a direct challenge to the rule of law, whoever is behind it, whatever their purposes, and secondly the everyday folk, and in particular those who are in employment, those who are unemployed but hoping for jobs, they are the people who lose out. So let's look forward, let's draw upon the painful lessons of Drumcree and look forward to a better way of handling things.

Deirdre Devlin

Those situations have the potential to destroy the very fabric of Northern Ireland society. Is it fair to leave that decision in the hands of the RUC?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well we have to apply the law which Parliament has thought it right to pass and I want to make it clear that I have every confidence in the Chief Constable. I believe his first decision was right and in the new circumstances that obtained five days later, I believe his second decision was right, but it is just because there is an argument to be held that people other than the Chief Constable should decide these things that I have appointed this independent Body to look at the whole question, whether the law is right, whether the balance between the functions of the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State, for example, are right. The whole question, and especially in the light of the lessons that may be learned from 1996. I hope everybody with views about this will express them to the independent Body. We will then have a completely unbiased and impartial report in the form of recommendations to me by the end of January.

Deirdre Devlin

What happens if there is a recommendation to change something and the Orangemen are absolutely opposed to this and we see tens of thousands of people on the streets again. What's to stop them?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

I think that it's very difficult to answer any hypothetical question and I don't think it's particularly helpful to ask them, you can say what happens if the bottom drops out of the North Sea tomorrow. Let's wait and see if that's going to happen. Meanwhile, let's go as far as we can in taking the public mind, asking people: 'what do you want, what do you think, you have seen what happened last month, you've been horrified by what you've seen, you've seen the cost, the damage to Northern Ireland and all who live in it, what do you want? If that's the right thing for me to be doing at the moment and then at the end of it Government will have to take responsibility for whatever changes may, if any are needed.

Deirdre Devlin

Secretary of State, if I can move on to the talks. They ended on Monday with agreement on rules procedure and you said that modest progress had been made, but that was something which had been expected to be agreed within the first few days of the talks, this is now 40 odd days later. Isn't that testing the definition of optimism to the limit?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well, I wonder who expected that sort of progress to be made in the first few days. I never met anybody who did. The sort of people I met were the people who are saying this process is hopeless, no good, Sinn Fein aren't there, never going to be any agreement. Those are the people I met and that's why I think that there is grounds for encouragement. Of course it took longer than I would have liked. It took something like 40 days to get the rules of procedure, but if you read those rules of procedure you will see how subtle and well balanced they are and they're very important that they should be acceptable to everybody. Now they are. Then they have gone on and appointed a business committee to govern the way in which their agenda is going to be handled in future. I would have liked us to have got much further, but during this process people have settled down, they have got to know each other, the chairmen have become actually accepted and they weren't to begin with and this is a modest start, more than a modest start. It is a start and it's a positive one and what is more that talks process is now adjourned and come back by consent at the beginning of September.

Deirdre Devlin

They'll be back in September, but all the problems have just been stacked up until then. I mean we're going to hit a brick wall on decommissioning.....?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, it's getting so likely that I'm going to have to say cheer up again. There are problems, why do you suppose that we have worked for so long to get this talks process together? It is because we have an immensely difficult division in our society here that most people believe that you've got to talk and find your way to a settlement and accommodation by talking. Now if it had been easy we'd all have lived very different lives over the last few years. It is not easy. Of course there's lots to be talked about but people have gone away with this modest achievement under their belts, they have gone away for a rest, I think everybody was tired. They fought elections, they have been into the talks. Everybody, I think, is in need of refreshment and time to reflect. It doesn't do anybody harm to have time to reflect.

Deirdre Devlin

Well by risk of sounding pessimistic again, Secretary of State, at the end of the day if any decision by politicians can be eclipsed by what happens on the streets, like in Drumcree, what hope is there?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Plenty of hope that people will say "we want to keep in a democracy, we don't want to see mob rule, we don't see masses and masses of people thinking that the way to get their way is by weight of numbers and weight of force". So let people bring their influence to bear, let not people say: "well, you know, I always like to go away or keep my head down or keep my opinions to myself". If they feel that this is a real threat to democracy, which it is, then let them say so, let them put their heads above the parapet, let them bring their influence to bear. Democracy doesn't really work unless that happens.

Deirdre Devlin

But if I can bring you back to your comments post-Drumcree that nothing could be done, isn't that an incentive for people to come out on the streets when there's something arrived at that they don't like?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

No, no, we must be fair about this. I was asked a question at a press conference - can you guarantee that never again will a massive weight of numbers overwhelm the security forces? I said no, I can't guarantee that. Of course I can't. I didn't say nothing can be done. A great deal can be done and one of the things which can be done is what I'm doing, that is to say establishing this Body to look at the whole question of parades, public marches, public assemblies. Meanwhile, there's plenty that can be done by what you might like to call the everyday folk of Northern Ireland. That is that they should make their feelings very, very clear, that they don't any more damage done to Northern Ireland of that kind.

Deirdre Devlin

It's been a slow process in the talks up to this point. You know, like yourself, you have been involved in it for several years now. How optimistic are you that there will be some movement in September?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Well, you see I have always denied being either pessimistic or optimistic. I don't think those are rational things. What I think people should be interested in is whether the Secretary of State, for the time being, has got sensible grounds for being hopeful, sensible grounds for telling other people that they should be hopeful. That's what matters and there are sensible grounds. We have been doing so well in Northern Ireland. Unemployment has fallen faster than anywhere in the United Kingdom, our exports are increasing faster than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, our manufacturing performance is going up better than anywhere else in the United Kingdom and tourism is increasing faster than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, enormous advantages and we're throwing them away if we go on with a repetition of the sort of thing we saw at Drumree. Now, that's sensible grounds for being hopeful because people here are very sensible, canny people and they don't want to see this progress reversed.

Deirdre Devlin

But the people aren't in there, they're not in Castle Buildings, and so far the politicians haven't even agreed an agenda?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

Ah, but you see, who are the politicians? The politicians are elected, aren't they? and they're elected by people whose opinions count. I think you do put your finger on something that's a little bit of a weakness for us here in Northern Ireland, but there are a whole lot of people who say "well, I can't really make my views known". They can and they should and they have got to try.

Deirdre Devlin

Secretary of State, you have indicated that you won't be seeking re-election come the next general election. As you contemplate what could perhaps be your final month in Northern Ireland, at the moment there appears to be no middle ground and the Government seems to be resigned to not having Sinn Fein involved in the talks, aren't you depressed?

Sir Patrick Mayhew

No. In spite of all your questions to me I am not at all depressed. First, for reasons that I have just mentioned, all the good things that have been achieved in these last four years. Secondly, the Government is not resigned to having any elected party outside the talks. What we want to do is to see those talks genuinely inclusive with every party that has got a democratic mandate taking part provided that they have shown, along with everybody else, that they're wholly committed to peaceful methods. Now, we have in being a process of talks, of negotiations, which so many people told me quite hopeless,

no good, never any chance of that, useless. It's there, it's in being. What is more it has got some modest achievements under its belt and it's going to come back to start again in September. Now, this is something really hopeful to hold on to and the last thing is this that we are doing this in a democracy where everybody has the power to make their voice heard, their views known. People can of course behave, if you like, irrationally, like lemmings and hurl themselves over a cliff, throw it all away. Of course they can. They can do that at any time. But I think the history of Northern Ireland, and certainly what I know of the character of the marvellous people who live here right across the community suggest to me that it's very unlikely they're going to do that. They're going to say: "we've had a look at what happens when you resort to violence, and we don't like it and we are going to make our views known".