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SECRETARY OF STATE DOORSTEPPED ON EXIT FROM BIIPB, BATH
- 25 SEPTEMBER 1996

Q: (Una Claffey, RTE, Dublin):

There is considerable speculation that Dermot O'Neill who was shot in Hammersmith was unarmed. If that's the case do you think it will do considerable political damage?

SOFS:

I think it's very important not to jump to any conclusions until the facts are established. I've got no comment to make about that, except that I very much regret any loss of life in any circumstances. And this is no exception.

Q: (unidentified)

How hopeful are you about peace in the Province despite all this?

SOFS:

I think there are sensible grounds for being hopeful. I think there are good grounds for expecting further progress in the talks. We've made progress. It's been slow, but of course it's bound to be slow, and so I'm hopeful.

Q: (John Egan, BBC News)

Some of the Irish parliamentarians here have been very critical of the manner in which the arrests took place. They say that damage is being done to the peace process...

SOFS:

Well, if they are, they are. I'm afraid that I'm not aware of the manner in which the arrests took place. I regret that any loss of life has occurred, but it's extremely important not to jump to any conclusions of one way or another. And I'm certainly not going to comment on matters which I am not informed about.

Q: (Egan)

If it turns out that he wasn't armed, what implications do you think that might have?

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SOFS:

It's a perfectly sensible rule, isn't it, not to comment upon hypothetical circumstances until you know what they are...

Q: (Egan)

But presumably you do know what the circumstances are. Two days have elapsed since...

SOFS:

Well I do not know. Allow me... allow me... I look after Northern Ireland and that is actually quite a substantial handful. I do not know what the circumstances are. What I do know, from what we've all seen in the newspapers and the news reports, is that an enormous arsenal of extremely powerful weapons was suspected. It had been found. And people associated with it, or thought to be associated with it, were to be arrested. Now I know no more than that, but I think that that background has to be borne in mind by everybody who comments in advance of knowledge of the facts.

Q: (unidentified)

You spoke of useful discussions in relation to decommissioning as late as yesterday. Can you give us any indication of progress so far?

SOFS:

A lot of talks have been going on - bi-lateral talks, sometimes tri-lateral talks, going on - with the Ulster Unionists and other parties, and the two Governments. Everybody knows that the question of decommissioning illegally held arms is a major obstacle. Everybody, I think, understands why it is an obstacle. I think it's very valuable that this talks process should contain room for meetings taking place - between two parties, three parties, bi-lateral meetings - rather than sticking the whole time in plenary. That's what's happening and I think that that's where progress is going to go on being made.

Q: (unidentified)

And you think that perhaps the SDLP and the UUP have moved closer on this issue?

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SOFS:

I'm not going to comment upon that. I think that it's very important that we should keep confidentiality. It's awfully difficult for people to negotiate when every move, every word, is being publicised. So I think I've got to respect that. But I do think that it's sensible to be hopeful.

Q: (Una Claffey)

All of the politicians here from the Republic - Opposition and Government - are extremely unhappy with the replies that you gave about policing at Drumcree. Does that concern you?

SOFS:

I'm unhappy, of course, if people take a critical view where criticism is unfounded. May I say that there is quite a difference in the position of the Chief Constable, who has the duty to uphold law and order and preserve life, and those who don't have responsibility. Hindsight is a wonderful gift, and people tend to have it sort of 20-20. I've left with the parliamentarians here a copy of the transcript - 60 copies of the transcript of a very extensive radio interview the Chief Constable gave, in which he set out exactly what the circumstances were. I think if they read that, and read it fairly, I think many of these criticisms will fall away...

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