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**Reference Code:** 2021/97/15

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FOR: LAVINA COLLINS/EMBASSY LONDON  
DATE: 15 APRIL 1995

FROM: C. O'Shea  
PAGES: 9

"Inside Politics" BBC Radio Ulster, Saturday, 15 April, 1995

Interview with Gerry Adams

Interviewer: Stephen Grimison

(Interview recorded on Friday 14 April 1995)

Interviewer: When I spoke to Gerry Adams yesterday at his Party's Headquarters in Belfast I first asked him about the prospects of talks between Sinn Fein and Government Ministers.

Gerry Adams: I think that we're at the point and we continue to try and make headway, but I think that we have exhausted efforts to break the impasse which the British have in a very artificial way created. Let me just rehearse what's happened. First of all why did the British delay going into talks with us, at Ministerial level when it was quite obvious for anyone who wants to look at the situation that we were going in on terms that would have been acceptable to them. They said they wanted to discuss all matters, they said they wanted to discuss decommissioning. We said fair enough, let's discuss it. Martin McGuinness and his team, at our initiative, went to Stormont to begin informal talks to try and break the impasse. We made a number of proposals including the fact, that if you can't agree with an agenda then let's go ahead without an agenda. And then we have here just before Easter the British moving forward with a statement by Patrick Mayhew which indicated that bilateral talks would begin. Now we all know there has been bilateral talks going on between most of the parties and the British but that they would start bilateral talks on the Framework Document, and then they indicated that Sinn Fein could be involved in talks with Minister Ancram after Easter. So it was obvious to us that

the delay was quite contrived, quite artificial and brought about with the mind of announcing bilaterals, in one hand with us in the second track on the other hand. Now that's totally and absolutely unacceptable.

Interviewer: You say you've exhausted all the various exchanges of views and exchanges of letters on the subject of the Ministerial talks. What actually happens now? Are you saying basically, we're leaving it with the British Government and it's up to them now to come to us and tell us when their are ready to talk to us, or have you any other means of producing Ministerial talks?

Gerry Adams: Well, first of all, the onus is on the British Government to respond to us. At this time - at the time of this interview - the onus is upon them. We have made suggestions to them and they must respond to us. Secondly, it appears to me that while we're very willing to try and break the impasse, that for as long as the British want to subvert the peace process or want to denigrate it almost like a game of scrabble, Sinn Fein and the British can pass back word formulations for as long as the British want to play word games. So we need others, and that's why I welcome the response from Dublin, from Mr. Hume, from right across the political spectrum in Leinster House, who said, let's get on with it. I mean the universal expectation is that we should all be involved in talks. So I think there is an onus upon all of the other parties, and particularly the Dublin Government which has to be dealing with the British as equal partners, to move the situation on. Can I come back just to this point. You see you cannot have a peace process which is viable if in the course of that the British or any other element are still trying to win victories. I mean the British for 25 years and more tried to defeat Irish republicans. That was a failed effort. They now seem to be pursuing that futile aim in the course of negotiations and for whatever reason it just wont work. So we have to stress, not as a matter of bartering, or as a matter of negotiations, but as a matter of principle, that our

party and more importantly the people we represent must be treated the same as every other section of the electorate.

Interviewer: Therefore, I mean you appear to be indicating that you may be pinning your hopes on getting into Ministerial talks on the sort of pressure that can be brought about by the wider voices of Irish nationalism.

Gerry Adams: Well, the Ministerial talks while they are important are not - I mean you've talked to Ministers - I mean Sinn Fein and the Ministers aren't going to be able to bring about a model. What we require is all party talks, or real peace talks, or peace talks led by both Governments involving all of the parties with every single issue on the agenda, everyone at the table, seeking agreement about how we all together build a society which can be peaceful and which can be just. And that's what's required, and you know the longer the British put that on the long finger, and engage in distractions and diversions then I think the more of a crisis can be built into this process. Because you see, unless you get a sense of good faith - even thought people mightn't trust each other - unless you get a sense of good faith, that really this peace process is about a peace settlement, not about PR, not about rhetoric, not about keeping one side or other, or element happy, but actually about bringing about an end to what we've had here for 75 years, then it becomes very difficult to move the process forward. So it needs real peace talks, multi-laterals, all the parties, in there looking for change. There are elements in this statement and in the British establishment who don't want change, or who may concede there has to be change but want the minimum amount of change. There needs to be fundamental political and constitutional change. There needs to be a total demilitarisation of this society. There needs to be a democratisation of the situation. The quicker we get talking about those, and in talking, Sinn Fein might loose out. Sinn Fein's arguments may not be seen as valid at all, and other people have a different analysis, so we're seeking agreement on how we shape all these things.

Interviewer: You've welcomed the intervention of John Bruton earlier in the week, but isn't it the case that you would have felt that you'd be much further forward in this whole process if Albert Reynolds was still the Taoiseach?

Gerry Adams: Not necessarily. I think we all have to deal with the situation as it is. I do welcome, may I say so, Albert Reynolds very forthright intervention of about a week ago where he pointed out that this issue, which the British have been flogging to death, of decommissioning, was never an issue, as the peace initiative was being put together and that's right. And can I say further, when we put together the jigsaw which brought about what most people didn't believe was possible - we brought about the IRA cessation which led to the loyalist cessation. When all of the possibilities which are now so obvious were opened up, I went to the IRA and said to them, along with my assessment and along with the strategy which we were outlining to them, had I said to them that before Sinn Fein gets involved in talks, before Sinn Fein voters are treated equally that you people must decommission their weapons, in my view there would not now be an IRA cessation.

Interviewer: You've said earlier in the week that you believed that the process has been damaged by what you see as this bad faith by the British Government. Can that damage be repaired, or will that always linger on, even if you do go through now into the process of exploratory bilateral talks with Ministers, leading into the more substantive bilateral talks, do you believe that the damage can be repaired?

Gerry Adams: We I think we have to aim to do it. But it's a two way street. Let me just clarify one point. We are expecting to be treated the same as other parties. We're expecting our voters to be treated the same as every other citizen. We have gone through a number of months of exploratory talks with Government officials. Those are now finished. When bilaterals open up with the other parties about the future of this island, when Patrick

Mayhew says that any issue - and we want to put forward our view that British jurisdiction should end, we want to put forward our view that a new and agreed Ireland is necessary - when those talks open up Sinn Fein expects to be there.

Interviewer: You played a critical role along with other senior figures in the party, in moving Sinn Fein from the two generations of abstentionism into this movement, into the democratic process. Now, but at the same time given all that's happened, could you understand, or can you understand that there would still be those in the republican movement who would want to go back to a policy of armalite rather than ballot box, given all that's happening?

Gerry Adams: Well we haven't got peace, you see we have yet to get peace. This is the first Easter where there is a possibility of peace. But what we have done is we have created a space, and it's within that space that peace will be able to grow, and I think that we have a duty to broaden this space and widen it and nurture what is a very very delicate flower. Until we get peace, until we get justice and until we get freedom, I mean there is what appears to be a loyalist arms find yesterday, armed loyalists parading about the Shankill Road a short time ago, loyalists involved in drugs pushing, loyalists involved in attacks on the homes of prison officers and so on, the threat coming from that quarter, the real threat coming from the British armed forces who still remain here, the fact that partitions still remains, that there's a social and economic deficit in this situation, the fact that we have no democratic rights, a heavily militarised situation, all should be accelerators, all should be encouragement to move towards a peace settlement and until we get a peace settlement. And until the people of this island have a society which reflects the diversity of all of our people, until the unionists leadership stop saying no, until we bring about a new agreed Ireland, of course there's always a danger that some element in this, not having peace will fall back into conflict and I sometimes believe you know that the

policy of the British Government may be aimed at bringing about that actual position, that the British Government finds it too difficult to cope with republicans in this new situation, and want to try and force republicans back into the old agenda.

Interviewer: There would be those who would perceive that as being a threat, that if Sinn Fein doesn't get its way then the arms struggle begins again.

Gerry Adams: Well I answered your question and it should not be seen as a threat. What I want to bring to the negotiating table is Sinn Fein's electoral mandate, nothing more and nothing less, and all I ask is the British Government, who have no electoral mandate in this country is that they recognise the rights of the people who we represent. I want to see an end to British rule in my country. I want to see the Protestant and Catholic people of this statelet joining together with all the people of this island for some new society. Whatever we can agree between ourselves as a way to mold our future. That's what I want to see. We are threatening no one with anything except democracy.

Interviewer: You mentioned a loyalist arms find, but there was an INLA arms find and there has been no INLA ceasefire. I mean would you have an Easter message for the INLA?

Gerry Adams: No. I have no single message for any party to this, except the British. My message to everyone else from the INLA through to the loyalists death squads,, through to the people in this island is, that the peace process needs to be consolidated, it needs to be moved on and we need to move beyond this situation into one where every citizen is treated on the basis of equality.

Interviewer: Can you understand though that the fears that would be expressed within the unionist and loyalist communities and reflected to some degree in terms of the Government's policy as well, that if the INLA are still active, have not called a

ceasefire there would be a belief, certainly in unionist quarters, that the INLA being a very small organisation could only survive under the sufferance of the IRA, that there's a worry about an agenda being there that the INLA is being seen to be useful to the IRA, and it hasn't called a ceasefire.

Gerry Adams: Well I have called for some long time to the INLA to be disbanded. I mean that's my long standing position. I think its a bit of a distraction actually. We've more important things to talk about.

Interviewer: But the nub of all of the Government's concerns about decommissioning, isn't it the belief, isn't there a perception abroad, both in the nationalist and unionist community, that there is no prospect in the short, medium, or long term that the IRA will ever hand over any weapons - there is no historical precedent for it- it's just not the way business is done here, given the way many of the parties in the republic have actually grown out of struggle.

Gerry Adams: I think that's a sensible view of the situation. But, I think that the nub, the core of the problem isn't that. The core of the problem is the British Government's refusal to acknowledge Sinn Fein's electoral mandate the British Government's refusal - and there's ample evidence, going right back to the 1980's - to accept that citizens here should vote for a party of their choice, that citizens here should not be treated as second class but they should be treated indeed as they are, as first class. That's the nub of the matter, I mean you've a crazy situation where a Sinn Fein Councillor cannot even phone up about a constituency matter and arrange to meet with a Minister, that if I phoned Stormont - I represent Sinn Fein - if I phoned Stormont, you will have greater access to the Minister than I would. Now, that's the nub and the core of the difficulty. How can you make peace if the British Government won't even, on a political level, talk to all of the parties on the same basis.

Interviewer: Won't your response to the question about that basis nature of decommissioning, won't that make it even less likely now that the Government are going to be prepared to meet you at ministerial level?

Gerry Adams: Why? We have an electoral mandate. I mean I could say that I won't meet the British Minister while British troops are still parading about here, while the RUC which is not wanted by any nationalists in this Statelet is still moving around undisbanded and undecommissioned. I mean we can all look for excuses. Sinn Fein's not an army. Sinn Fein doesn't have arms. Sinn Fein has an electoral mandate. We want to use our influence along with everyone else and move the entire situation forward. The whole issue of decommissioning of weapons is in many ways a very big distraction but we want to get in to discuss this. That's one of the issues among all the other issues.

Interviewer: You're accusing the Government of bad faith. But what you appear to be saying is; we will go into to talk about decommissioning and we'll talk about it all day long but we'll never actually give any commitment to actually decommission weapons, nor will we go and ask the IRA to do so.

Gerry Adams: Well, first of all my straight commitment is to see all of the guns taken permanently out of Irish politics. There would not be a peace process - many people have done good work - but there would not be a situation we're now in without the efforts of Sinn Fein. We intend to keep those efforts going.

Interviewer: You've applied great effort to get yourselves involved in the inclusive dialogue, in the inclusive talks that you believe will bring about a resolution. Earlier this week we had the SDLP meeting the Ulster Unionists and then meeting with the DUP and quite an unprecedented day of meetings. But isn't it the fact that you are actually no nearer sitting down with all of those parties, because there is no prospect, certainly in the short to medium term of, for instance, you sitting down with Ian

Paisley or sitting down with James Molyneaux.

Gerry Adams: Well I'm quite certain that if we're going to have a peace settlement - and we are going to have a peace settlement - then it will have to involve all of the parties sitting down, and that includes the unionists, and I have no doubt that the unionist parties will sit down with Sinn Fein as we move into that phase of the peace process. What we all have to do is to ensure we move into that phase with some urgency.

Interviewer: Its all very well saying that. I mean there is no prospects of those people - I mean in terms of the short term, can you put any even guesstimate on how long it will take?

Gerry Adams: I have done interviews here with you and your colleagues for years and I was saying we were going to be involved in talks with the British Government, and the British Government were saying no. The British Government said we'll never talk. The British Government even said that if we were talking to them that it would turn Mr. Major's stomach. Now, I asserted then, and journalists might have been sceptical and said, you know there's no possibility of this happening. I am now asserting again. We are in regular contact with grass roots unionism. Grass roots unionism while it may not be prepared to give up it's ideological position wants to see a settlement. Ordinary citizens, unionists and nationalists understand the need, the common sense need to talk - they don't want to go back to what there has been in the last 25 years. More and more people who I meet are privately and quietly starting to acknowledge that yes - unionism did have a responsibility for what happened here for the last 75 years. So my sense of it, in many ways, while the unionists are keeping up, at leadership level are taking up negotiating stances, is that grass root opinion wants to move the situation forward into talks and that those talks in my view - because I'm talking to these people - they feel must involve Sinn Fein.  
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