



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/99/20

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

③ Copy.

25

FOR: M BROWNE/EMBASSY, LONDON

FROM: P Williams

DATE: 29 August 1997

PAGES: 9

Press Conference with Secretary of State and Minister Murphy

Friday, 29 August 1997

Questions and Answers session after opening statement

Part Two - Questions and Answers

Reporter: What historical precedents are there, if any, for any known groups for handing over weapons in advance of any inclusive settlement?

Mowlam: There is, here, a position that we've had for many months, and the previous Government faced month after month, where there was a group who wanted them before the Talks handing in, and a group wanting them in at the end of the Talks Process. We spent many months in that quandary. What we face, in line with the Mitchell Principles, which I think is a sensible compromise, which says that alongside Talks, in parallel with Talks, there will be an Independent Commission set up at the same time as the Talks start, making it possible for weapons to be handed in. We would like to see weapons handed in tomorrow. That is not going to happen. However, we believe, and we think it is a requirement in the Talks process for those weapons to be handed in. Now, in our specific view point, we will have the machinery there, we will have the talks machinery moving on. The only way you're going to get it, is the trust and confidence that builds up in that Talks

process when you get that momentum working, then it makes it possible for weapons to be handed in. We think it is a requirement, it is essential for that process to move forward. So that is the machinery that is in place and that is what we and the Irish Government would like to see.

Reporter: Is it your assessment that the IRA has given up violence for good or are you simply moving forward towards the Holy Grail of peace on the basis that that is a hope that will come about with the momentum of the talks?

Mowlam: On the basis of the information that I have at present, I believe it to be an unequivocal ceasefire, that active targeting has stopped. That is the basis of where I am now. I can't answer that ad infinitum, nobody can, but I think we have the basis for the beginning of confidence building and a talks process to move it forward. That is where we are at and that is where we are moving to.

Reporter: Secretary of State, you say that substantive negotiations will happen on the fifteenth, talks will resume on 9 September at the point where they broke down in July, that's the information we have. David Trimble has said he will not allow the Talks to move forward until decommissioning is settled to his satisfaction. So how do you move on when he will not allow it because his consent is required to move these things on?

Murphy: Well I will answer that, if I might. First of all the Talks didn't break down before the Summer, certainly there was a disagreement as to how we go ahead with decommissioning, but as the Secretary of State has already said, we hope that as time goes by the Mitchell compromise on decommissioning will be accepted by all the parties. On 9 September we'll be looking again at the procedures by which we will be able to go into the substantive negotiations which start on 15 September. Our view is that it is right and proper that the whole people of Northern Ireland, represented as they are by all parties, ought to be present in inclusive talks in those negotiations. We have to see what happens, of course, over the next couple of weeks, but my hope and my prayer is, that the Unionist community will, of course, be represented at those Talks.

Reporter: Can you outline again, how you understand consent, given your comments in yesterday's Belfast Telegraph?

Mowlam: As I said during my introduction, consent to me is crucial, it is essential to our principles and the way that we have acted in Northern Ireland and the basis of how we will act in the Talks in the future. I've said it is essential, Tony Blair has said it is essential and the triple-lock guarantees it. What consent means in that way is that no answer, no solution, no outcome, is going to be forced on the majority community in Northern Ireland. The triple-lock guarantees that. That is the basis of consent and that is what it means to me and that is why it is so important, in answer to Stephen's question as well, for the Unionist Community to know that that consent is there. It is one of the guarantees and one of the reasons why, if they came into the Talks, they would actually in negotiations have a very secure position. But what I'm saying in addition, what I was trying to say in the last couple of days, is what we have to work for is an accommodation across the board. Because if it gets to a vote on a majority/minority situation, we have moved it forward. We will still have a large dissatisfied population. So consent stays, but at the same time, what I want to do, is build an accommodation that includes the interests of all the people in Northern Ireland so we have a hope of moving this process forward.

Reporter: Can you assess today for us? Some of our colleagues are using the word "historic", I think most of the reporters in this room feel that you still have massive problems with the Unionists over decommissioning and the rest of it. How do you assess today? How important is today?

Mowlam: Well, whether it is historic or not, what is important is we are still continuing to try and push things forward. In a hundred odd days, I think we've done quite a bit. I think today is a very important step in achieving that. But unless we get inclusive talks, we are not actually going to move the process forward in the long run. So as you say, we have to get the Ulster Unionists, or Unionist parties in too. We can always in Northern Ireland, look at today and say it is good or bad. I'm not prepared to give up hope, push momentum and say that we set ourselves a timetable. Tony Blair was very clear. We'd

start talking on 15 September and we go to May 1998 to try and get an accommodation that we could put to the people of Northern Ireland. So, yes in some senses, but not overall, because as you rightly say, we've got a hell of a lot of hard work to do, and there are a lot of problems on the agenda still. But I refuse to be a problem focused person. I'm not going to say there is always problems, "Oh God its terrible today". I'm prepared to say this is an important step. In some ways it is an important step, and from there lets try and deal with the problems rather than focus on them. Do you agree or not?

Murphy: I agree entirely, and I think in a sense, it is historic because we are on that road. There is a long way to go, of course, but I think that the progress, as the Secretary of State has said, within the last hundred days, has been quite remarkable, despite the difficulties and setbacks that we've had.

Reporter: Secretary of State, I was told yesterday that the meeting yesterday with the Prime Minister was a very tough meeting in terms of Unionism, it was put up to me very firmly that you are going to have a referendum or a package next May. Is that such a lot that Unionists cannot stay out of this process, in terms of sitting down across the terms in the negotiations with Sinn Féin?

Mowlam: It was a tough meeting. Both sides put their positions very clearly, but it was a productive meeting, as tough meetings usually are. In that sense, we outlined the agenda that we intend to continue to follow and the Unionists outlined their concerns. So yes, in a sense, that May 1998 date is there, but it is there in a firm sense. I hope that we can get that accommodation in the months building up to that. It is not, some people say, that it is too short a time, I am not sure it is, I think we could do it in a shorter time if there was a willingness on behalf of the parties to sit round and take that risk, take that extra step.

Reporter: Mr McGuinness and Mr Adams are talking a lot these days about a united Ireland as being on the table, to what extent do you think a united Ireland really is on the table as something within the realm of possibility for this round of negotiations?

Mowlam: I think all options are on the table. As we have said before, parties will come with their desired outcomes and they will be very very different and that is why, in relation to the previous question, it looks like a tough job that we have on our hands. I think that it is unhelpful to try, in relation to people's ultimate goals, to try and say that this is not going to happen for all of them, they all come in with their own hopes and desires. In the end, as Mr McGuinness has said, they are going to have to change, everybody is going to have to change a bit, not just Sinn Féin, not just the UUP, but the British and Irish Governments and if we are going to move anywhere, we have all got to change, accommodate and take the talks process seriously. So I am sure the parties come with very different final goals, but negotiations and accommodation are about talking with others on that subject.

Reporter: Could I ask you a question about the referendum in May next. An increasing number of participants in this process are coming to regard this as a completely unrealistic target. Isn't the history of initiatives in Northern Ireland littered with examples of the fact that you cannot impose a timetable on this kind of political process?

Mowlam: If your latter point is the case, yes, and I do not accept the first. Because if you look at what is on the agenda if we can on the fifteenth get moving on inclusive talks then I think it is doable. If the will is there by the parties, we can actually move this forward and as I said I do not think it is too short. I think we could do it in shorter if there was a commitment by everybody to move it forward, but I do not accept that it is unrealistic, I think we can get there if, as I think many of the people in Northern Ireland want is to see peace arrive here so that there can be normality, there can be prosperity.

Reporter: You para-phrase one of the Mitchell Principles requiring the signatories to renounce violence or oppose violence by others should they resort to that during these talks. In your discussions with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, did they give you any indication that they would change their stance for the first time condemn IRA violence or Republican violence should that take place?

Mowlam: I cannot remember whether we covered that specifically, I do not think we did. We only had one meeting with a much more general discussion. The direct answer to your question is that if on 9 September that Sinn Féin come, and I assume they will do, and they sign up to the Mitchell Six, you have your answer. They are then in the process of signing up to the Mitchell Six Proposals to exactly that criteria of renouncing for themselves, and oppose any effort by others, to use a threatened force to influence the negotiations. You have your answer when they sign up.

Reporter: Would you envisage a meeting between the Prime Minister and Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness after referring to the Mitchell Principles or possibly even before it and before the fifteenth?

Mowlam: I think our position on this has been made clear right from the beginning. We have said that when Sinn Féin pass today and the conclusion is as we agreed and they are then invited to the talks process on 9 September and sign up to Mitchell Six but they will then be treated as any other party in the talks process. From that one can assume that the Prime Minister will, as he often does, see leaders of all the parties in a round up, he does that quite often. So I would assume that when he next does that the leaders of Sinn Féin will be included.

Reporter: That will be before the fifteenth would you envisage?

Mowlam: I do not know the diaries of everybody, I do not know what is planned in that sense, but I am not going to put a date on it, but I am also indicating to you quite clearly it is not going to be a long drawn up process, it will happen.

Reporter: Do you sense that this is really the big opportunity now for peace for the millennium and that the people will not easily forgive their politicians if they do not grasp the opportunity now and really come forward with some radical new proposal for a settlement.

Murphy: I think there is certainly a will out there in the streets of Northern Ireland amongst all communicants, Catholic and Protestant, for there to be a genuine move towards peace and towards a settlement. And, I think, for example, the decisions by the constituencies associations of David Trimble and Geoffrey Donaldson indicates that in the Unionist community for instance there is a very strong feeling that there should be talks occurring and everybody at those talks. After all, people were elected to talk and I think that everybody in Northern Ireland wants talking to occur and to that extent wants a peaceful settlement and a proper settlement by the next century, which is not very far away of course.

Reporter: William Thompson, who is a fellow member of Parliament of yours, he is Ulster Unionist, he said this morning that this is a sad day for Northern Ireland, to be unthinkable this happened, and he said that any Unionist who would take a seat at this squalid negotiating table is betraying the memory of those that have died in the troubles. What can you say to William Thompson who thinks that?

Mowlam: I am not quite sure when he says that the unthinkable has happened because the unthinkable is an attempt to bring peace and less loss of life in the future for his community and for others. So if the unthinkable is about saving lives, then yes we are indulging in his definition of the unthinkable and I think most people in Northern Ireland would want us to do that. I am very sad that he takes that view and I would like to discuss it with him in more detail because I do not understand why it is so difficult for people to try and get round a table and see if they can find a settlement that everybody can live with.

Reporter: But the point I think he was making was that this is too soon and that there is people out there who have been victims of IRA violence and what might they be thinking today, what can you say to them?

Mowlam: Well, as I have said on previous occasions Mark, my thoughts are always with the friends and families of those that have been murdered and killed by people on all sides in Northern Ireland, particularly the security forces and my thoughts go to them. I have talked to many of them and yes the anger, the frustration and the loss they feel is very very great.

But I can tell you many of them at the same time say what we have got to do with Governments is get Governments and politicians talking so that there is a hope of bring peace and other lives are not lost. Now we can always go on history and look in the past and see what has happened, we have got to understand that past, we have got to make sure we know and learn lessons from it. But my goodness we do not have to live in it and what today is about is trying to move that process forward and I hope that the Unionist community as a whole will understand that what we want to do is bring what confidence and trust we can to them to give them solace in an understandable difficult time and we will do all we can to help them. But this is the time for people to represent their communities and try and find a way forward for the betterment of everybody.

Reporter: Going back to the principle of consent and just to get it on the record, are you saying that in fact you accept that the majority in Northern Ireland need to give consent to any change to the constitutional status at the end of the day.

Mowlam: That is what the documents say up to now and that is there in writing for everybody that reads everything that has gone before. Absolutely right, and that is what I say to the Unionists, there is a guarantee for them to go into the talks, but what I say at the same time is if we get into a situation whereby we are voting on something that has not had an accommodation, an agreement with people across the communities and there is something there for all the communities to identify with, then we are not voting for something that is a positive attribute to the future of Northern Ireland. It will be there but the whole point of the next month is to make it such that it is not just one against the other, that is what the following months are about.

Reporter: Can you tell us what the status will be of the Framework documents during the coming negotiations?

Murphy: It will very much be a basis for discussion in the next six or seven months. It is not the only thing that will be on that table and I think what is important to understand is that if you do have proper round table talks that all those parties can bring to those talks all

their views, all their principles, all their aspirations and that is why it is so important that we all meet together. So yes of course the Framework Document will be included in those discussions, so they are not there as a straitjacket, there is a basis for discussion.

Reporter: Have you said that you might be voting in order to avoid a position where you were voting with a majority and minority view, are you talking there about a referendum or votes in the talks negotiations themselves?

Mowlam: I am talking about the referendum because as Mervin just said it is a majority vote in the referendum and the majority vote will count. But what I am saying in the talks process as we work up to the referendum, if it ends up as a 51/49 then we do not have an accommodation and that is what I want the next month to produce. In the talks itself decisions are made by sufficient consensus, which is both sides have their voice heard and that is one reason why on the fifteenth there is a lot of value in the present process. Others are obviously being canvassed around, but I think the present process offers us a chance to keep that sufficient consensus and keep a mechanism in place, and regulations and ground rules, in place which most people have found able to work with.

Murphy: I think it is also important to say that of course consent does mean at the end of the day that there is a majority of people here in Northern Ireland voting for that package that is presented to them. But what we want is that there is an overwhelming majority of the people in Northern Ireland approving and voting for an agreed package sometime next year and that is exactly what we mean by an overwhelming consent of the people here in Northern Ireland and that is what we are working for.