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DOORSTEP: DAVID ANDREWS AT CASTLE BUILDINGS, 1 DECEMBER 1997

David Andrews

Well thanks very much indeed first of all for the opportunity of sitting out of the cold which is a help to our metabolism if nothing else, but I think or gather that it is not for the first, or the last time, we have had a rather difficult day but let's face it I think you'll agree that we are dealing with the residue of some hundreds of years of history. But I would imagine that most of you would be interested in turning to my remarks over the weekend and to make it very clear that the use of the word 'Government' was misinterpreted. You will recall that my interview with BBC Ulster was, I don't know, somewhere in the range of 15 minutes and that in the totality of the interview any fair minded reading of it would illicit the reality that the way it was presented and taken out of context, 'Government' that is, and the word Government was misinterpreted. And, you know, on reflection it's not a word I would normally use or intend to use in that particular context but there is something that I would like to disabuse now. I never did, nor never would, propose a third source of power as being suggested. That was a suggestion being made from whence I cannot recall but it's quite untrue and quite, quite out of reality with the statement I made. I think it's fair to say that I have made it clear in a number of interviews and statements that any North/South body would be subordinate to the two legislations. An Assembly in the North and

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the Oireachtas in the South and would be fully accountable to both. And of course the great failsafe mechanism, and it would operate by unanimity. All of these are matters for discussion, negotiation and agreement in these particular Talks. I have made this position consistently clear, almost as a mantra: all things are on the table, all things are open for discussion. In short everything must be by agreement and consensus, it must be transparent and must be fully accountable. We have a lot of urgent work to do, in fact as I speak I understand that a sub-committee of the plenary is actually meeting and I believe that we are all determined to go into the Christmas break with a sense that real and early progress can be made in the New Year. That is what an overwhelming majority of the people of this island North and South want. They want peace, they want peace in our times and they see this as the opportunity for peace, certainly in my generation, and if it's not taken at this time it will be a long time before the opportunity raises it's head again. So with those few opening remarks I would invite questions.

Media

Do you you regret saying "like a Government"?

David Andrews

You see there's a suggestion of apology in that and I am not in the business of apology. I am representing a sovereign government and what I have indicated was that the word 'not unlike a Government' was misinterpreted in the totality of

what I said. Now if I could unsay, as it were, and do that radio interview again, I would not use the word Government.

Media

Do you appreciate the damage it's done to David Trimble's position?

David Andrews

I understand and having spoken to Mr Trimble and indeed the loyalist parties this morning, that they consider that the use of the word Government was inappropriate and unacceptable.

Media

Do you accept that?

David Andrews

Of course Mr Trimble is a man of honour. What Mr Trimble says is an honourable....

Media

Do you not think the phrase was inappropriate?

David Andrews

I just told you that I said the word was inappropriate, sorry do you want me to repeat it?

Media

Mr Andrews could I ask you Sir, though I mean to say, the thrust of what you were saying was within, very much within the confines, parameters of the Framework Document along the European model lines, I mean to say you are not resiling from any of that are you?

David Andrews

Of course I am not resiling from any of that and why should I. The Framework Document quite clearly sets out the position, the parameters of what is

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sought to be achieved in an all party, multi-party agreement, and so be it. There is nothing sinister about that, and that's what these negotiations are about, so let's get into the negotiations, let's get down to the negotiations.

Media

Could I put to you Minister you were interviewed for 7 minutes and 21 seconds and we ran every single word of it...

David Andrews

Look I have no problems about that, and I respect that it was over 7 or 8 minutes, I have no problems about that. But in retrospect it sounded like an awful long time.

Media

Could I put it to you that the position that you did outline in terms of the various cross-border elements being responsible to a Secretariat would then have directional powers and the powers not unlike a government, that is actually further out than any party here has gone, including the SDLP.

David Andrews

Yes I think you will accept that the words 'not unlike a Government' is further than anybody has gone and as I say if I was to have the opportunity of going back on the 7½ minutes that word would not be used again and I make a firm commitment to you, the media, and to those parties within the multi-party Talks who find that word offensive not to use it again.

Media Could I ask you Sir, if you don't mind me asking you, did you actually say to the unionists, as they claim, that in fact you would do the honourable thing, did you apologise, did you use those phrases to them?

David Andrews I did say that I would do the honourable thing on the basis that I am a man of honour and that I would clarify the position as far as the statement is concerned. I did say that yes.

Media But it wasn't in the context of considering your position as suggested earlier by Mr Trimble.

David Andrews Did Mr Trimble say that?

Media Yes he suggested that the Taoiseach should actually move you on Sir, and move you and send somebody who would be, in his words, competent or otherwise. This was before your explanation Sir.

David Andrews I wasn't aware of that quite frankly. I have no comment to make on that, if Mr Trimble says these things about me I mean, so be it. I have no problems at all about it.

Liz O'Donnell We are here to deal with substance and the extent of the powers to this proposed North/South body is a matter for negotiation so while, by way of this skirmish today, we have really hit a substantive matter and that is to what extent will this North/South body have powers, and those are matters

for negotiation and we look forward to moving into those matters tomorrow with Mr Trimble and indeed the other participants.

David Andrews Did Mr Trimble actually say that, what were the exact words he used? If you would be kind enough...

Media Someone more sensible. You should be changed and the Taoiseach should send somebody more sensible.

David Andrews Yes, I just want to get the thing very accurate, I have no further comment to make on it, that's grand.

Media Question spoken in Irish.

David Andrews Reply in Irish.

Media You see Minister one of the reasons why you on on the rack over what you said...

David Andrews Hold on a second, I mean I don't feel I am on the rack.

Media Well they're putting you on the rack, Sir, I mean to say..

David Andrews Well that's a matter for them. I have no problems about that.

David Andrews

Yes I agree with you Miss Cadwallader this is one of the problems. The reality is that the, we are talking about on the one hand negotiations on Articles 2 and 3 and on the other hand the suggestion of North/South institutions with executive powers. Now I think that's a balance of accommodation which is not unreasonable and I don't think people should get themselves into a knot over it. So what I am suggesting to you, and I am suggesting to the other participants in the Talks who find, as I say my position over the weekend untenable, that in those circumstances we should get down to negotiations and get down to negotiating the very thing that you have mentioned Miss Cadwallader, that's what we are here about. And what's happening out there presently I don't think does the Talks any good at all.

Media

Yes but one of the reasons why they are nailing you on this particular issue is, and they have said it very publicly, Mr Trimble said this is the second time since your arrival here that you have thrown the, in his words, the peace process into crisis against the backdrop of the original remarks attributed to you about Articles 2 and 3. It was in that context that he suggested that somebody else should be sent here.

David Andrews

Well I understand that the first time when I sort of made my remarks in the context of Articles 2 and 3, they walked out on the basis of their unwillingness to allow me complete my statement and that afternoon they walked back in, so that couldn't have been seen as a crisis. And quite frankly I think that in this particular instance, and I would like to think they would also walk back into these Talks. Fundamentally as I say, you know, I take second place to the Talks and all personalities take second place to the Talks and it's absolutely important that these Talks continue in the interests of the whole island, fundamentally important.

Media

Minister, doesn't it show though how far apart the two sides are, because the SDLP are on the record as saying there have to be cross-border bodies with executive powers and at the mere mention of that the unionists get, take some offence.