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Report No. 0,135

Transmitted on RTE I - TV - Today Tonight

Length

Date 5.10.81.

Time 9.15pm.

Short Title Michael Foot on the Irish Question

Olivia O'Leary:

A united Ireland and a divided British Labour Party, we talk to Michael Foot.. We are starting this evening with the British Labour Party Leader, Michael Foot. With the hunger strike in the North now over and after a British Labour Conference, which was focussed on Ireland as never before, what is Labour's policy on Northern Ireland now? Last year Mr. Tony Benn, repeatedly advocated British withdrawal and the U.N. Force to keep the peace; small groups in the party have advocated withdrawal for years, but the Party establishment stuck to its bi-partisan approach. Michael Foot confirmed that Northern Ireland would remain British as long as the majority so wished. Mr. Foot however was put under increasing pressure by the well publicised views of Benn, a powerful shadow cabinet member, and one who was fully aware of the growing calls for a change in policy fueled by concern for the hunger confrontation in the North. Anti-British publicity generated by the hunger strike, made many Labour Party members uneasy and did not want to be associated with Mrs. Thatchers policy. At a fringe meeting the Pro-Unity Labour Committee on Ireland heard from Hunger striker MP Owen Carron and welcomed a speech which condemned British violence as causing all other violence and saying that those who bore arms deserved to get killed. The crowd also welcomed a message from the Long Kesh prisoners addressed to their fellow socialists, asking for hunger striker support. For other left wing MP's like Mrs. Joan Maynard, and long time Irish campaigner Kevin McNamara, the policy finally adopted by Conference did not go far enough, it rejected withdrawal and confirmed Party support for power sharing as an interim measure. But it did commit the party positively to Irish unity in the long term, with of course consent, working class solidarity in Northern Ireland and the introduction of radical socialist policies there, which are all part of Labour's plan for eventual Irish unity. So how significant a step is Labour's new policy? Does it put any strain on the bi-partisan approach by the Conservatives? Or is it a cosmetic exercise merely to pacify the groups in the party calling for British withdrawal? Forbes McFall spoke earlier today to Michael Foot in London.

Forbes McFall:

Mr. Foot, can I ask you first of all about the hunger strike, which ended this weekend, do you think Mrs. Thatcher's Government handled the whole affair well?

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Michael Foot:

I don't think it was handled perfectly, but also I would never criticise the Thatcher Government on the particular question of the hunger strike, because we did not think it was right to do so, and we did not think that any criticisms that we made, could have saved the situation. I am glad the whole thing is settled now, because and like the vast majority of people, I would have thought in the North and in the South, they would welcome the calling off of the hunger strike. That means to say that we can try and get back to settling the problems of Ireland peacefully, that is what I am in favour of and that is what the Labour Party is in favour of and that is why I welcome the end of the hunger strike.

Forbes McFall:

Now when you say you didn't think Mrs. Thatcher handled the hunger strike perfectly, are you suggesting perhaps that she could have been more flexible at the time?

Michael Foot:

I am not entering into any criticism, I am glad that the matter is settled and I believe that is the important question and we as a Labour Party, and I take full responsibility for it, we did not make any fierce attacks on the Government on the subject, because we thought that would only encourage the IRA or the Provos. or whoever they might be, to persist in their campaign. So we did not criticise on that account. That does not mean to say, as some people have suggested, that we have always had a bi-partisan policy, we have not. The Labour Party has made up its own mind and has its own policy on these questions and we have now of course in our last Conference embarked upon a new, fresh policy which we have worked out for ourselves.

Forbes McFall:

One last point about the H-blocks, what do you think should be done now, this week regarding the situation in the H-blocks?

Michael Foot:

I have no doubt that there are some general concessions to be granted to all prisoners and in some respects in the H-blocks in their prisons, for better conditions like in many parts of Ireland and indeed in Britain as a whole. But that does not mean to say that we in the Labour

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Party are not in favour of further concessions being made, that are made to all prisoners, and I think that can be helpful and an advantage. So I hope that happens. I repeat and underline that we in the Labour Party have never been in favour of the granting of so-called political status to the prisoners there, and our reason for opposing it was we believed it would encourage other people to engage in acts of terrorism.

Forbes McFall:

But you do believe that further concessions should be made along the lines.....

Michael Foot:

Made to everybody, that is right. I think that is a good thing. We have said that and made that clear to everybody throughout.

Forbes McFall:

Now last week, the Labour Party committed itself to Irish unity by agreement and by consent. Is this your own personal view, do you favour Irish unity?

Michael Foot:

Yes I do. What we did as a Labour Party Study Group, I agree with the conclusion they reached, we examined the long term future. We have had this Committee sitting for the last two years and we have had it for the last two Conferences as you may have noticed. We have had quite a lot of pressure for saying that we should have a fresh statement of party policy on the matter. At the beginning of that document perhaps I could underline it and say I hope everybody who is interested in the subject will read the whole document and not take what I say here today as a proper full account of it; because I think it is a serious attempt to look at the whole problem and to balance the different aspects of it. At any rate, we looked at all the long term solutions to the problem and we as a party have come down in favour of a United Ireland as the ultimate objective, provided, and I have no doubt, we will discuss this / until the unity process is carried through by consent and agreement and democracy and not by force and terrorism.

Forbes McFall:

We can come to the question of consent later on. But why Irish unity?

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Why has the Labour Party now publically committed itself to Irish unity?

Michael Foot:

Partly because it is in our tradition, the Labour Party way back in 1920, at the time of the founding of the Republic, was in favour at that time of a united Ireland. If you look at the other alternatives we don't think in the long term they are going to provide the satisfactory basis for a free and peaceful Ireland. As long as the partition exists, so long will there be the seed of the violence. But I do think that a united Ireland in the end has great advantages. But I couple it all the time, the two things must always be said at the time, we are not in favour of establishing that united Ireland by force, but by peaceful negotiations and peaceful means.

Forbes McFall:

In that answer you seem to be saying that unless partition is ended, at what ever time it is ended, we cannot expect an end to violence?

Michael Foot:

I don't say that is the legitimate cause of the violence and I do believe, and I again repeat, that we are not going to say to the people in the North, or the majority of the people in the North that we are going to try and force them to do what they don't want to do. we want to persuade them that the best future for them and the best future for the socialist objectives, which we share for people in Ireland, as we share for people in our own country, that there should be a united Ireland. Anybody who looks at the history of Ireland, can see that working class, for example, acted in unity and acted together on many of the great periods in Irish history and we don't see why that should not happen in the future. We would like to see a socialist policy being carried out North and South, and I certainly think if you look at the economic situation, both in the Republic and in the North, there is a very strong case for socialist policies to overcome those desperate conditions.

Forbes McFall:

Now the NEC document, your national executive committee document, says that Labour will campaign actively to win the consent of the Northern Ireland people, for peaceful reunification. In practical terms, what

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does that mean? What in fact, is the Labour Party going to do between now and the next election?

Michael Foot:

As far as establishing any new party or any new operation, all that depends on the discussions that take place and first of all we will have discussions with the trade unions - the trade unions have played a very big part in the North, they are the best element in the society and society there opposing sectarian resorts and I think, therefore we have to have discussions with them. Of course we have had discussions with them, prior to production of this document. I am not saying that this document would command full support amongst all the trade unions in the North, it would not and it would be unfair to say that it would. I believe that it would have pretty strong support and when we have further discussions with them, then we can carry that further. The sentence to which you refer, is an important one, a sentence in which we say not merely we put forward these proposals and the people can just take 'em or leave 'em, but that we are going to try and advocate them in the North and elsewhere and we think we can win support.

Forbes McFall:

So, do you personally favour the setting up of the British Labour Party in Northern Ireland?

Michael Foot:

Well, we shall see whether we do it by dint of a fresh party of that nature, but whether we do it by that method, or by some other method, we have to advocate our view there, that is to say, persuade people to support it, then I think we have got a chance.

Forbes McFall:

You talk about a socialist Ireland, and uniting working classes on socialist policies and so on, but if we look at Northern Ireland, is it not quite clear that the working classes have never been more polarised than in the last year and furthermore, if I could just make another point, parties that have set up to establish class politics in Northern Ireland, the Republican clubs and so on, have failed dismally?

Michael Foot:

Well it is perfectly true what you say; it is true also that the

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position has become more polarised over past two years and is one of the condemnations of the IRA, of the Provos and those who resort to terrorist methods to try and deal with the problem, so far from advancing the cause of a united Ireland, that they have set it back. Because they have set it back, does not mean that it has got to be abandoned for ever, that is why we have looked at it, and we are looking forward with these proposals. I repeat again, we are not trying to do anything by force, and we have to persuade a majority of the people in the North who are at present opposed to idea of moving towards a united Ireland and we have to try and persuade them that they should move in that direction, stage by stage, and also to discuss with them how we should proceed along those lines. It may be that we should have some kind of government that is going to change the situation prior to the branch towards a united Ireland. Thereto we would have to do it by disucssions, stage by stage. Power sharing in some fresh form, could figure in that movement towards that, but I am not saying that is a definite position, it depends upon what response we get, to the proposals we have made.

Forbes McFall:

Is there really anything definite in this document? It seems to go two ways, perhaps three ways; on the one hand you favour an internal settlement in Northern Ireland; on the other hand you talk about opening up talks with Dublin; then there is this other strand of opinion, that talks of getting class politics going in Northern Ireland. Is there really one Labour view emerging from this document?

Michael Foot:

Yes. I think there is one Labour view, because I don't think that any of those three things that you mentioned are inconsistent with one another and each could assist the other. If you look at some of our proposals, they are not so different, I don't want to put a label on it. from some of the proposals that have been advocated by parties that compose the present Government in Dublin. They, some of those parties, have advocated movement towards a united Ireland, but not by force, and therefore our proposition is not so different. And some of those parties have also backed proposals for various forms of power sharing in the meantime.

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Forbes McFall:

Can I ask you, Mr. Foot, what your priority is? Is it an internal settlement, or is it the ending of partition?

Michael Foot:

The ultimate objective, and we acknowledge it, is a long term objective it is not going to happen soon. It has got to happen if it is going to be successful, by the methods we describe, and therefore it is not going to happen soon. So if you ask me what is the priority? There will have to be some movement internally in Northern Ireland, before we can move towards this later objective. I don't see it happening over a very short period - I don't think anybody who has advocated these proposals along these lines, imagines it can be done in a short period - but I do believe that if we stick to it, and if we can only persuade people that is what we are determined to stick to, not only the Labour Party, but Britain, then I think we could find a very considerable response from people in Ireland as well.

Forbes McFall:

The bottom line, is it not, that your job is to persuade hard line Unionists that power sharing, or even a United Ireland, is worthwhile? What makes you think that Ian Paisley, who has gone from strength to strength, is going to pay the slightest heed to your side?

Michael Foot:

I don't think Ian Paisley is going to subscribe to this document, but there are very few Labour party documents that he was ever likely or would have subscribed to. So the fact that he will be against it is not necessarily conclusive, and he does not necessarily live for ever and his view may be one which would not predominate amongst the Unionists for ever. There has been over the past few years, a considerable divergence among the views, even among the Unionists. So nobody can say that they take today, exactly the view they took 20 years ago, there are divergencies.

Forbes McFall:

But if you look at the view the Unionists took six or seven years ago, when there was a body of Unionist opinion, that went into a power sharing administration, and look at the Unionist opinion today, does not

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all the evidence point to a hardening of Unionist opinion?

Michael Foot:

Maybe that is the case, the hardening is primarily due to the terrorists, and to the hunger strikes as well, if you like. Even more to the reappearance and the regrowth of terrorism on such a scale, that of course has played into the hands of the Paisleyites, and that is the way these things unfortunately and tragically work. That is why you have to establish a new atmosphere. But what were we to do as a Labour Party to establish a new atmosphere; we had to set out some longer objectives, which we as socialists would support and we looked at the other alternatives. One of the reasons why we arrived on this alternative was because we think the case against the other alternatives is even stronger, if I can put it that way. The case against the establishment, proposed by Jim Callaghan, and example of an independent Ulster, I don't believe that is going to work. I believe both of the communities would be strongly opposed to it. Then the idea of integration with the United Kingdom, that is obviously a proposition which is not going to be accepted by the minority in the North, at any time. Therefore I don't believe that is a solution to the problem. In any case I believe that we have to establish the principle that any solution in the North that is going to be acceptable, has got to be a peaceful one. I believe that the Labour Party's allegiance to that principle, absolute allegiance to that principle, and their refusal to depart from it, it a very important factor, because that is a rejection of all the proposals that have been made within our own party, sometimes, for saying let it be settled by force. We say no.

Forbes McFall:

Can I sum up your position by suggesting to you (I don't mean to be disrespectful to you, when I say this), that you have pious aspirations towards an united Ireland, to power sharing administration, but you really are not quite sure, as to how you are going to get there.

Michael Foot:

First of all pious aspirations are better than impious aspirations, and some of the aspirations of the extremes on both sides in the North are, to describe them as impious, is a very moderate way to do so.

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Some of them are utterly disruptive and condemning the community to, what appeared to be a few months ago, their fate. Utter disaster. I hope we are pulling back from that. There are some sections on the extreme Protestant group and there are some sections on the extreme so-called Catholic group, amongst the terrorists group, which would condemn Northern Ireland to utter disaster and to civil war. Just as I think there would be civil war in Northern Ireland, if the British troops were withdrawn. That is one of the reasons why some of us have been so strongly opposed to that course, if they were withdrawn in these circumstances, I think Northern Ireland would be condemned to some situation like the Lebanon. And that is why we resisted it, so you had to chart another course, with some kind of long term objective. Now you are perfectly legitimate to say, you state the aspiration, but how do you get there, it is more ill-defined. That is naturally the case, because the way in which we get to that depends on how we can persuade people as we go along.

Forbes McFall:

Can I put it to you, Mr. Foot, that Unionists would always veto moves towards a united Ireland, or indeed towards power sharing. If you concede that constitutional change in Northern Ireland requires majority consent.....

Michael Foot:

I understand the whole of the argument of course, this is one of the matters that figured most prominently in all our discussions. We have not stated the position about this so-called veto, in old fashioned terms. We have not stated that there has got to be a referendum or a plebiscite to settle the matter, that does not mean we depart in any sense from what I have said about consent and our absolute opposition to settling things by anything other than peaceful means. But you will see in the paragraph on that subject, which has been carefully drawn, we propose to consider to proceed with our discussions on this matter, whatever may be the view of Unionist leaders about the matter, we do not say they are not going to have a veto on our proceeding to have these discussions. Unionists are not going to have a veto on the conclusions, but the people in the North, voting by some means, they must have the right to give their consent, otherwise it would be a departure from democratic principles.

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Forbes McFall:

Is there a hint there that you might consider going over the heads of the political parties and hold a referendum?

Michael Foot:

Well let us see how we proceed. I think referendums are not very good things necessarily for settling any problems, although there are certain circumstances where it is essential to have them. And it may be the only way in which it could be done in the end, would be by having some referendum, but we are not bound to a referendum under this document, and indeed we specifically have not stated that we are bound to deal with it by a referendum. Let us proceed, the atmosphere may change in a period of years, now that may sound extremely optimistic, to say that anything is going to change the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic, but you know there have been great changes in the history of Ireland, and great figures who have come forward and preached the doctrine, which I happen to agree with. Matters are better settled peacefully. Michael Davitt, who was one of the greatest of all Irish leaders, he was in favour of settling matters by peaceable means when he could do it, and he advocated such measure, and urged such measure. He did it at some times, which were the most critical and difficult and sometimes people who have advocated settling matters by peaceable means in Ireland have been called traitors. But sometimes years later when people have come back and looked at it, they have seen how wise they were. Sometimes people who have tried to settle things by peaceable means - Michael Collins suffered for it, but nevertheless what they advocated turned out to be right.

Forbes McFall:

You stress throughout this interview that you seek unity by consent, peaceful means, but is there not a growing body of opinion within your party, led by Mr. Tony Benn, and indeed other moderate MP's, Kevin McNamara as well, who want to see an ending of partition, quite speedily, they want to see British withdrawal quite speedily, they don't go along with the notion that there is an internal solution possible in Northern Ireland and they reject the notion of the Unionists having a veto.

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Michael Foot-

They have had all their chance to put their views. I would not necessarily say that Kevin McNamara's views on this matter - he is a very prominent member of our parliamentary labour party on Ireland and is a very considerable authority on it - are the same as Tony Benn's on this subject. Tony Benn's views on the subject were entirely turned down by the Labour Party Conference, and there was a motion which absolutely rejected any such proposal. The idea of United Nations troops being brought in as the only ones that could settle it, I don't think that is supported by any great opinion in the Party. As for saying that the growing support for either the views of Kevin McNamara, as defined by you (I don't want to criticise his views specially, because he has other views as well on the matter), but the idea that there is a growing opposition to what we are putting forward here, is a strange conclusion, when we have just had a Conference in which overwhelmingly what we say in this document, has been approved by very big majorities in the Labour Party, and alternative proposals which did include various forms of the withdrawal of British troops. So it is not the case that there is a growing different view in the party, this document represents the majority view and it is the outcome of discussions in the North especially, particularly with the trade unions there, and the part of the document which rejects the withdrawal of British troops and which rejects trying to deal with this matter by force, can I assure you command widespread support by the Party, widespread majority support.

Forbes McFall:

Mr. Foot, the role of Dublin in the future moves towards a united Ireland, what role is that?

Michael Foot:

We, when Mrs. Thatcher and the present Government started the discussions with the previous Government in Dublin, criticised the fact that there were not full reports made on those discussions to the British Parliament. Criticisms were also made in Dublin about the forms of report there. But we did not criticise the fact of the British Government talking to the Dublin Government - I think it would be quite absurd for any Labour Party in opposition in Britain to criticise a British Government for having detailed discussions with the Dublin Government. When we become the Government, as I trust we will soon, we

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will of course have discussions with the Dublin Government on these matters and indeed on many other matters too, on a whole host of questions, on which we in Britain and you in Ireland have common interest. And I think we have, as this document indicates, a common interest in the peaceful way in which we could settle the Northern Ireland problem, if I can describe it as such. We certainly want such discussions.

Forbes McFall:

Mr. Foot thank you for talking to us. Goodevening and back to Dublin.

Olivia O'Leary:

Michael Foot, now leading a ~~British Labour Party~~ party, which shares with all major parties in the Republic, the basic aim of eventual Irish unity.