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INTERVIEW WITH THE SECRETARY OF STATE: 1 NOVEMBER 1989

Secretary of State:

I was delighted when the Prime Minister invited me to become Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and everything which has happened in the past three months has confirmed my pleasure of that. I have been made extremely welcome. People have been very warm towards me; I have much enjoyed myself and there is clearly a very worthwhile job to be done.

Interviewer:

Were you very apprehensive when you were appointed to the position?

Secretary of State:

No. The apprehensiveness of unfamiliarity but nothing beyond that.

Interviewer:

We are coming, Secretary of State, to the fourth anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It's as unpopular now in unionist circles, as it ever was. Is the Agreement really set in concrete? Is there any possibility of it being set aside to allow for talks?

Secretary of State:

What I've said on previous occasions about the working of the Agreement in the context of talks is that if we got to the stage where talks were sensible then one obviously would explore whether there was a procedure which we could adopt which would be acceptable to everybody, but I think it does not make sense exploring that until it's clear that there is a genuine opportunity for talks which everyone wishes to have.

Interviewer:

The Unionists have yearned for (indistinct) suspension of the Agreement etc, they're non-runners?

Secretary of State:

No, you will recall that as a consequence of the quite long gap that occurred between the Conference in May and the Conference in September it was said in August that if everyone had known that there was going to be this sort of gap that opportunity could have been taken; that was obviously a retrospective remark rather than a remark which was made in May, but since a gap of that sort occurred there has to be a possibility that

such a gap would appear in the future.

Interviewer:

Is that a hint?

Secretary of State:

No, I'm just being pragmatic. The critical feature of the talks and indeed of any settlement or transfer of authority which might occur is that it should be something that everybody subscribes to. In so far as the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the working of the Conference is an agreement with the Irish Government that is obviously something to which the Irish Government would also need to subscribe, but I don't see any point in crossing these bridges until there is a clear sense on the part of everybody that they think that talks are sensible - and about talks I mean inter-party talks - are sensible and would have a prospect of success.

Interviewer:

So you need to get signal from the constitutional parties that they are willing to use a gap in the Conference to begin dialogue?

Secretary of State:

I have had preliminary meetings with all the leaders of the Parties and the leaders of the Parties have made clear that they could envisage having further conversations with me or with the Government. I think we need to go through that phase before we would know whether there was a sufficient meeting of minds on everybody's part to go to the next step. What encourages me is - and this is obviously something has been happening over the three months - is an increasing desire on the part of a whole series of politicians from different Parties to actually see movement occurring.

Interviewer:

When will this next phase begin?

Secretary of State:

I would have thought that this was something which we would be exploring between now and the end of the year.

Interviewer:

So is it wrong to suggest that you have been placed in a caretaker role to keep the lid on the pot till the next general election when you can move things forward?

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Secretary of State:

The position of the government has consistently been that we would wish to see the transfer of power to local political Parties and local politicians in Northern Ireland, but equally that that would not work unless it was a proposition to which everybody subscribed. Therefore there is no point in embarking on a large-scale dialogue unless there seems evidence that that second condition is satisfied.

Interviewer:

So there will be no initiative by the Government?

Secretary of State:

No, I'm not saying that. There could be circumstances under which it would emerge, but the Parties would not feel able individually to subscribe to the joint proposition a but might feel able to take part in talks if the Government was putting forward a proposition on which everybody would be involved to give some ground. If that were to occur there would be a clear responsibility on Government, but one thing which I am not going to do is to come down from Mount Sinai with a series of tablets saying these are Brooke's propositions unless it is clear, as indeed I think it has become clearer in the last three months, that the local Parties do actually wish to see movement.

Interviewer:

And this movement forward is supported by the Irish Government. For example why has devolution not been discussed within the Anglo-Irish framework?

Secretary of State:

The simple answer is why I have not discussed it is because the three meetings of the conference which have occurred since I became Secretary of State have been very much devoted to security for reasons I think that will be familiar to everybody, but that does not in any way rule it out as a subsequent subject of conversation.

Interviewer:

Alan Dukes seems to blame the Dublin Government for not giving enough attention to devolution at the Conference. Would you go along with that?

Secretary of State:

I couldn't possibly, in the light of what has been our agenda for the last three meetings, I couldn't possibly complain that we should either have had a fourth meeting or that the meeting should have been even longer in order to take part in discussion on devolution. I think that devolution is a serious subject and it needs to be handled with the same degree of dialogue as we have recently been devoting to security. As I say, I would expect, assuming the conversations go forward with the local political Parties that it is a subject which I would be wanting to discuss with the Irish Government thereafter. I incidentally remark that Mr Dukes' observations yesterday are yet another straw, and I don't mean that derogatorily, but there is another indication that there is a tide flowing in favour of that transfer of power to which I was referring.

Interviewer:

Dukes said all roads follow the path to devolution. Would you go along with that?

Secretary of State:

It has been a central position, a central tenet of the British Government's position, that they wish to see a transfer of power as and when the local Parties were collectively willing to see that occur and in that sense Mr Dukes is reinforcing that observation.

Interviewer:

From your discussion with the Unionist leaders did you discern any weakening or a more conciliatory attitude from them?

Secretary of State:

To be fair I met Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneux when I had been here for less than 3 weeks, so it is very early in the course of the 3 months but they made it clear that they would be happy to have further conversations and I think we will have a clearer idea of the Unionist position in that regard as and when we have a second round.

Interviewer:

Will it be before Christmas?

Secretary of State:

Yes, I'm not setting this precise deadline but I think that seems to be sensible. That's what I would be aiming for.

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Interviewer:

Does it disappoint you that the Unionists are planning yet another round of protests against the Anglo-Irish Agreement on the anniversary?

Secretary of State:

Let me respond as a politician. I am a politician myself, I am in favour of consistency in terms of political positions provided that consistency does not put you in a position where you have no subsequent flexibility of movement at all.

Interviewer:

Will you sum up at this stage what your relationship - what the Government's relationship is with the Irish Government, given the background of disagreements on matters relating to security, UDR, extradition etc?

Secretary of State:

Here I am obviously expressing a personal view. One of the considerable virtues of the Agreement is the fact that it gives us the opportunity to talk through (I used this phrase on a previous occasion in the same tone of voice as I am using now) the issues which do in fact transcend the Border and which have implications for both the Republic and ourselves, and in that respect I have now had three Conferences. I find it a good working arrangement and I find that the tone of the debate, with Mr Collins and Mr Burke, though inevitably it is occasionally adversarial for reasons you would understand. Nevertheless the tone of the debate is good.

Interviewer:

On a personal level how do you find you're getting on with the Irish Ministers?

Secretary of State:

On a personal level I get on with the Irish Ministers excellently.

Interviewer:

Some critics of the Thain case saw it as one way traffic and that Dublin demands on Britain expected to reply?

Secretary of State:

Well, it's difficult for me to make any long-term judgment because, as I say, I've only had the three months' experience in this area. In the case of the last three months because of

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certain events which have occurred here the Irish have perfectly reasonably been putting a series of questions to us, but I could readily envisage that over the next 12 months there'll be a series of issues which I would be putting to the Irish. I will say in the context of the last three months that at no stage has there been any diminution of the co-operation between the Garda and the RUC in terms of cross-border security.

Interviewer:

Can you say what sort of issues you think you will be putting to the Irish Government?

Secretary of State:

Having spent part of the last three months trying to avoid megaphone diplomacy between the Irish Government and myself I think I'd be slightly guilty of it if I actually started talking about those sort of things now rather than talking about them to them, but they will obviously emerge in public, nor do I want to be over-dramatic about this, but I was simply responding to Mervyn's question about the nature of the dialogue.

Interviewer:

Since you arrived here, Secretary of State, it has been a quite traumatic period for both the RUC and the UDR with various revelations about leaks and allegations of collusion. Would you accept that National confidence in the security forces here has been very badly shaken since your arrival - not because of your arrival - but with leaks and documents surfacing here, there and everywhere?

Secretary of State:

I would have to answer the question at two levels. There is no doubt that if a genuine wrongdoing occurs like the episode at Dunmurry where a particular cabinet was forced in order to remove information, then that, without necessarily going so far as to describe it as collusion, those are actions which reduce confidence in the security forces and that is why the Government has been so determined to identify who were the perpetrators of episodes like that. I think inevitably some of the drip-feed on recognition material which occurred over the month between - I suppose it was really the month of September and into early October - much of which was somewhat antique documents produced to papers in Great Britain - that I think was, while it was unfortunate in terms of the general impression it gave, I don't think it was so serious and the Army and the Ministry of Defence have moved against that by saying that any recognition material of that sort which any soldier serving in the Province, or who has served in the Province, should in fact be handed back, is a demonstration of the Ministry of Defence themselves taking that seriously.

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Interviewer:

On the question of the UDR and re-vetting, do you think that the Regiment realistically can ever become acceptable to the Nationalist community?

Secretary of State:

Well I think we need constantly to remember that at the inception of the Regiment it did in fact have a large Catholic element in it, comparable to the Catholic element in the RUC, and I'd be the first to acknowledge that that number, that proportion has fallen in ensuing years, partly no doubt because of political events, but also partly because of a quite deliberate policy by the IRA to target Catholic members of the UDR disproportionately for assassination. I would regard it as a failure on the part of the Government if that action by terrorists should cause the Government to resile from the UDR as an essential part of the security forces. As to the question of confidence in the UDR, which you mentioned, there is a determination on the part of the Government to further professionalise the UDR: you will know that the part-time element in the UDR has fallen substantially in recent years, is significantly below its complement and a significant part of that part-time now are women, are Greenfinches, who are doing administrative jobs which would otherwise have to be done by soldiers themselves.

Interviewer:

Are you more or less confirming then that it is the Government's intention to run down the part-time UDR?

Secretary of State:

No, I didn't say it was the Government's proposal. I was just simply saying that the part-time element has fallen, and the full-time element has in fact grown in proportion to the part-time element,

Interviewer:

Is it your intention to phase the part-time element out altogether?

Secretary of State:

No, I am just making an observation that if in fact you could recruit part-time people you would do so. In other words there is plenty of room within the manning levels of the Regiment for more part-time soldiers, but in fact recruits have not been coming forward on a part-time basis, perhaps for the understandable reason that if you have done a full-day's work the idea of being up all night on military duties may over the years become progressively less attractive, but the fact remains that the balance of the UDR has shifted to where the permanent cadre in fact plays a larger part. That does actually assist in terms of the professionalisation of the Regiment, again I think for understandable reasons. The increase in the number of regular Army officers and NCOs is a contribution

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in the same direction. We have referred to the vetting element and the whole thrust is, as I say, to make it steadily a more professional instrument, that relates obviously to the training as well.

Interviewer:

Could we see the day when the UDR is entirely full-time?

Secretary of State:

Well it is certainly not the present intention because there is a large part-time complement and establishment within the UDR but I'm just simply saying - I was responding to the question about confidence - the fact that as a matter of fact that part-time recruitment has fallen off means that with an increasingly full-time force an objective of professionalisation comes easier for the Ministry of Defence to enforce.

Interviewer:

You say it's not your present intention to see it becoming a full-time force?

Secretary of State:

No, what I was describing is what has actually happened. I wasn't describing Government intention at all, but I'm saying that the consequence of it moving to being more a full-time force reinforces the MOD's intention to increase its professionalisation.

Interviewer:

How do you assess the terrorists' threat at the moment during your three months?

Secretary of State:

I think one would say two things. I think that the security forces have done an excellent job right through 1989, within Northern Ireland, in terms of containment and a series of terrorist initiatives have in fact been frustrated of which the earlier attempt on Belfast jail was obviously the most recent. The fact remains that incidents involving violence do continue at a significant level and therefore I would not dream of any circumstances of being complacent - the level of terrorism continues to demand a high level of vigilance on the part of the security forces, to whom obviously I pay the warmest tribute for what is done on behalf of the community as a whole.

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Interviewer:

Going back to confidence in the security forces in retrospect, was the decision to reinstate Corporal Hastie not a very very bad mistake?

Secretary of State:

Well, I would simply say that was something which had occurred prior to my arrival as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He had been reinstated earlier in the summer. The working agreement and arrangement between myself and Mr King, who of course was my predecessor here, is that in any such case in the future there will be a specific Northern Ireland dimension to any decision.

Interviewer:

Not so long ago a very senior Republican described to me that in the present state of play there were yourselves and themselves, basically that it was a Mexican stand-off position. Can you ever see the day when maybe not you but the British Government can sit down one day and talk to Sinn Féin?

Secretary of State:

I'll need to give you a slightly elaborate answer to that because there are obviously a number of factors which weigh with it. The first factor is that I would recognise that in terms of the late twentieth century terrorist, organised as well as the Provisional IRA have become, that it is difficult to envisage a military defeat of such a force because of the circumstances under which they operate, though the security forces can exercise a policy of containment to enable, broadly speaking, normal life to go on within the Province. So in that sense it would require a decision on the part of the terrorists that the game had ceased to be worth the candle, that considering the lifestyle they have to adopt, that the return which they were securing from their activities did not justify the costs that it was imposing in personal terms on those who were engaged in their activities. There has to be a possibility that at some stage that that debate might start within the terrorist community and that moment might come. From the Government's point of view, clearly the improvement in the conditions of life for everybody within Northern Ireland, and that includes obviously economic developments, bringing jobs in, including to West Belfast and other areas of high unemployment within the Province, would not, of itself, cause terrorism to falter, but it would be a contribution towards conditions in which that debate might occur within the terrorist community. And likewise a transfer of political power to local politicians, under a principle of consensus, would also, without again being decisive, be a contribution towards a solution. Now, if all that were to occur, then you would move towards a point, if in fact the terrorists were to decide that the

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moment had come when they wished to withdraw from their activities, then I think that Government would need to be imaginative in those circumstances as to how that process should be managed. I think it would be foolish to be making statements today about what would happen then, but I hope that because of the welcome which would be given to a return to peaceful conditions in the Province by everybody living here, I hope that the Government at that stage would be imaginative in how it responded.

Interviewer:

That's quite a remarkable statement.

Secretary of State:

That's an observation for you rather than me.

Interviewer:

That is quite an admission on the part of the Government that they would in fact consider speaking to the Gerry Adams and Danny Morrisons of this world.

Secretary of State:

Let me remind you of the move towards independence in Cyprus and a British Minister stood up in the House of Commons and used the word "never" in a way which within two years there had been a retreat from that word. All I'm saying in what I say is that just as I would hope that, in answer to an earlier question, the Unionist parties while remaining consistent in their position, would retain sufficient flexibility to be able to bring solutions to come to pass, so I hope that the British Government on a long-term basis would be sufficiently flexible, that if flexibility were required it could be used, but I am in no way predicating or predicting what those circumstances would be.

Interviewer:

But one clear circumstance, as you made clear, is that the IRA must stop violence. That would open up a whole new vista, you are saying.

Secretary of State:

It goes without saying, there are any number of circumstances within the Province which would be a great deal easier to address in the interests of everybody if violence was not occurring.

Interviewer:

Do you think earlier release of long-term prisoners could contribute to improving the

atmosphere in the community and deter support for the IRA?

Secretary of State:

- I think that in a number of ways which have already been exercised in the terms of the release of long-term prisoners and in their release on leave, both in the summer and at Christmas, have made contributions to a relaxation of tension within the Province.

Interviewer:

Just turning, Secretary of State, to another page your predecessor Mr King when he was here, forecast real improvements in the employment situation. Do you, given what you've discovered in your first 100 days here, share that optimism?

Secretary of State:

I think it will be a gradual process. What I am consistently struck by since I arrived is that those who come to Northern Ireland for the first time, and I am now talking about business people and others, say that the situation is a different one from that which they had expected and therefore the more we can communicate to the outside world, the extent of normality within the Province the better in terms of encouraging investment from outside. Obviously in terms of economic life within the Province itself we are going to be very much governed by circumstances within the United Kingdom and the general economic momentum there and I obviously have confidence, looking to the 1990s, of that momentum being maintained, but in terms of outside investment then the critical thing is to get people to come and see what life is like here, and the fact that we have had a series of successful attractions of business is of profound assistance because then you've got third party witnesses who can actually say how well their business has done since they've arrived here.

Interviewer:

Can you say in a nutshell what Tom King's advice to you was when you took up this position?

Secretary of State:

Ninety days is long enough but I think I've forgotten. But I will say that Tom and I had that 4-day overlap because of a chance

Interviewer:

Can you say in fact what have been the biggest problems you've encountered?

Secretary of State:

I don't think I want to describe it in the context of problems. I simply repeat what I said at the beginning that I was glad to have been offered the job, that everything that has happened has confirmed that, that I have been made very welcome, but I've enjoyed myself and that there is a very worthwhile job to do.

Interviewer:

Could you pick out one highlight of the 100 days?

Secretary of State:

I will say, and I obviously say it with a very slight degree of irony that the nature of the relationship between the media and the holder of my office is, I think, different possibly from that which exists with any other Cabinet Minister in the United Kingdom, and I hasten to say that has pluses as well as occasional minuses.

Secretary of State:

One thing which I would say, and I've said it before, is I am not in any way predicting what time-scale we would be talking about. It would be impossible to predict what time-scale one would be talking about, but if in fact between us and among us we can in fact resolve the difficulties that have beset Northern Ireland over the past 20 years not only would we be conferring great benefit on those who live here and to a lesser extent on the rest of the United Kingdom but we would also be providing a small lesson for the rest of the world.

INTERVIEW WITH SECRETARY OF STATE: QUESTION ON SINN FEIN:

1 NOVEMBER 1989

Tom Kelly (BBC):

Do you see any role at all for Sinn Fein in the political process?

Secretary of State:

I can't predict what will happen at some stage in the future. If within the terrorist community they were to come to the conclusion that they wished to retreat from violence it would be wrong for me to be laying down observations now about how we would handle that situation when it comes. We would need to deal with that as and when it arrives, but I would hope put the question about terrorist activity that at some stage a debate would start within the terrorist community, in which they would ask themselves how much they had really achieved in terms of their specific objective in the last 20 years and whether it has not, if anything, gone backwards as a result of Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, where the Irish Government too have subscribed to and endorsed the principle that it is the majority in Northern Ireland who should actually determine the constitution of the future of the Province.

Tom Kelly (BBC):

You do not rule out the possibility of Sinn Fein entering the process if they disavowed violence?

Secretary of State:

As I say, I am not going to be in any way hampering the freedom of flexibility of myself and my successor by making statements on that score at this stage.

Tom Kelly (BBC):

But if they continue supporting violence?

Secretary of State:

If they stick to supporting violence there is no way, or in any way in which we could entertain conversation with them. What I can't tell is what the future will hold. I'm not going to be inflexible in my language now and in any way hem in what position we might adopt at some stage in totally different circumstances.