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**TRANSCRIPT OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BETWEEN**  
**THE TAOISEACH AND THE BRITISH PRIME MINISTER**

**11 JULY, 1996.**

T: John Holmes indicated to me that you would be available to take the call from me at 8 o'clock. I have been sitting here in the office for the last 2 hours waiting for that call. I am glad you have eventually taken the call but I would have thought that you mightn't have let me know that you would be available to take a call at 8 o'clock if you weren't.

PM: I wasn't aware you wanted a call at 8.o'clock John. I have -----

T John Holmes told me that he specifically -----

PM I have been at a series of meetings and not least dealing with the problems of Northern Ireland and was is now happening in various parts of Northern Ireland all evening.

T Yes, yes. Well I have been sitting here watching the television and watching the results of the decision that was taken by the Chief Constable this morning, which is very very serious I have to tell you. I think it is showing force winning the day and one of the things I have spent my time working with you was to demonstrate that there was another way forward apart from force and here we have force measure on the part of the mass gathering of Orangemen forcing the Chief Constable to change his position on a matter that he had decided earlier in the week, and the negotiations that were continuing through the churchmen were still continuing and still offered some prospect of success, but they were just swept aside and this decision taken.

PM But that is not my advice John at all. That is not my advice of the complete picture in any way. What has been happening over the past two days in which lots of people have been involved trying to get a conclusion is a bit more complex than that. I mean one of the problems for much of the last two days is that the Churchmen and others have been trying to get the Garvaghy road residents to put up someone to negotiate other than a convicted terrorist convict.

T He served his sentence.

PM They flatly refused to do so. But they never made \_\_\_\_\_

T \_\_\_\_\_

PM Nobody is going to talk to him.

T Sure David Ervine was a terrorist too.

PM Leaving people behind to make trouble. The trouble here is on both sides. I am not defending the Orange Lodge, God Help me I'm not, but it isn't all one sided on this occasion.

T I don't think that it is reasonable to use the excuse that this man was convicted. If he was convicted he served his sentence and he has been released. A number of people in politics in this country on both sides of the border and on both sides of the political divide were in jail at some time or other. I'm in Government with a man who was in jail. The Minister for Social Welfare was interned for a lengthy period.

PM We have been trying to get an agreement, John Everybody it seems one way or another to be putting something in the way of an agreement. The decision taken by the Chief Constable was his and his alone. He has to take the decision on operational grounds and he did it to avoid the loss of life. Tomorrow there would have been lives lost very probably as not the few thousand that are there now but 50,000 thousand people came to take part in the marches. I don't take operational decisions and I can't. But I can quite see why the Chief Constable did what he did. 50,000 people would have overwhelmed the RUC, overwhelmed the Army, and the people whose lives would have been at risk would have been in many cases the Catholics who live on the Garvaghy Estate and that is something that the Chief Constable had to take account of and he did. And I think if you or I had been Chief Constable we also would not have regarded the loss of life at all lightly and that is the situation that he faced.

T Well this brings back the same type of argument that was used to capitulate to the Ulster Workers strike in 1974.

PM Well I'll put the point the other way round John. I don't want to squabble with you I have had the last 2 or 3 days trying to deal with this in the most discrete way possible. What would you have done? Would you have overruled the RUC and then face the risk tomorrow that there would have been 50,000 people in a mass loss of life.

T Who made the decision then to block the road in the first place? What happened here is that the appearance has been created that the RUC started off to block this march but when the numbers on the other side, in other words when the force on the other side got too large, they decided to back-off. I mean this is not something that has happened for the first time. We have had a previous experience of this issue last year, so we had 12 months to plan for it. Why start off on a route of saying that you are going to not let the march down the road and then, entirely predictable events developed as they did, why did the RUC back-off today?

PM No it wasn't entirely predictable was it and for this reason, last year, there was a stand-off and then there was a negotiation and a small number of the marches went through. This year Hugh Annesley saw what was

happening, wanted to stop it and hoped there was going to be a negotiated settlement. For some days there has been an attempt to negotiate a settlement. It takes two people to reach a local compromise. I can't form a judgement as to who would have reached it, but I understood for the last two days that the marchers were prepared to go through with a small number of people. The residents weren't prepared to agree with that. In the period that built up during which this impasse continued, lots more people were coming and tomorrow being the 12th July there would have been a very large number of people there, perhaps in the view of the RUC, 50,000. Now that was not the situation as we had seen before. It was an unprecedented situation and if he had done nothing and those 50,000 had broken through tomorrow and a lot of people were killed, many of whom no doubt in that area would have been Catholics, I wonder what would have been said then?

T I don't believe that the British Army is unable and the British Forces are unable to protect people to that degree. It seems to me that starting off on the course of saying that you are going to block the road and then when the numbers get too large backing-off does not convey a sense of resolution or a sense that your Government is in charge.

PM I resent that John and if you want to continue the conversation in that fashion you can continue it alone, because I'm not going to.

T No,

PM Operational decisions are for the police. The British Government - I don't know what your Government does - the British Government does not interfere with operational decisions either by the General Officer commanding the Army or by the police in terms of street control, crowd control and operational matters. It is our habit to take the advice of those people unless there is a very strong reason to override it and in this judgement I have got no experience of control of that area, neither has Paddy Mayhew. He was absolutely right to take the advice of the Chief Constable. If there had been loss of life - which there has not been, - if there had been loss of life and he had not taken the advice of the Chief Constable, you and everybody else would have been at his throat for not doing so.

T You claim that the RUC were in a very difficult position. To allow them to be the ones that are taking decisions of this nature, I mean these are quite essentially political decisions, they are about order in society and who makes the rules and who ensures that the rules are kept. They are the essence of politics in my view, and to place the RUC in the position that it alone is taking such decisions, makes it very difficult for the RUC to win the acceptability that they need to win from the entire community because they are being placed in a position of taking what

PM John would you have instructed the Garda what to do?

T Yes if necessary, Yes, not in terms of individual prosecutions or that sort of thing-----

PM No, no, in terms of control of a street problem?

T Yes, I would accept responsibility that at the end of day that the first responsibility of Government is to maintain order, and if you-----

PM That is not what I asked. What I asked was whether you would actually instruct the Garda when they are actively in control of a street problem as to what to do and instruct them to act against their professional advice and against the advice of the Army.

T This was not a decision that was taken in a split second. This was a decision that was predictable over several days and was-----

PM... I'm sorry John, you see, I do not agree with that. The circumstances were changing during the period. The negotiations were going on during the period-----

T They weren't finished when the decisions were taken.

PM They did nothing but negotiate for the last few days.

T The negotiations hadn't been concluded. The churchmen were actually just leaving the building when they were told that the decision had been taken to proceed to allow the march through. The actual negotiations were still on. This decision was taken almost in a way that actually

undervalues the future use of church people as mediators because they were stepped aside.

PM John, I don't yet know quite how the decision was taken so I'm assuming you don't quite yet know how the decision was taken

T Well I know that the timing is such that the church men were still in the building having meetings or concluding a meeting when this decision came through.

PM Without success.

T Without success, yes, but I mean that sort of decision isn't taken in a split second, so plainly that decision had been reached some hours previously. But they were allowed to continue on.

PM I don't believe that is the case. I don't yet because I haven't cross examined the Chief Constable about his decision and I wasn't aware we were going to have this sort of conversation about an operational decision by the Chief Constable.

T. Well I can tell you this, this has done untold damage to the feelings of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland and I have to say of the people in this State. People here are appalled at this and I really want you to understand how strong the feelings are here. You know my record in matters of this nature. I would not speak in a way as to magnify feelings if they were not as they are. The feelings here are very very strong about this decision and I believe that-----

PM The feelings are that strong in the North as well, John, and our job is to try and damp down those feelings, not puff them up.

T Indeed.

PM And that is what I shall try and do.

T Could I put one point to you again? Do you not agree that placing the Chief Constable of the RUC in a position where he is making a decision of this nature, will make it more difficult for the RUC in dealing with a divided community where there are two very different traditions in

conflict with one another in a very difficult situation vis-à-vis having the RUC accepted in both communities and would you not agree with me that this decision is likely to put back relations between the RUC and the nationalist community by up to 5 years?

PM I couldn't possibly put back the relations of the RUC with the nationalist community it is the intransigence of both sides which ensures that there couldn't be normal street policing. That intransigence is on both sides not one John. I would put to you an alternative question which has the same force. Do you think taking the experience of the last few years that people would actually have faith in the RUC in the way they had started to have if they thought the RUC were under the direct political control of Ministers? How do you think Sinn Féin would have played that over the last few years?

T Well I think that people at the end of the day have more confidence in Ministers who are ultimately accountable politically for making political decisions than they would have in the Chief Constable making what is in effect is a political decision. This is a political decision in its effect and in its nature. It also has a security dimension. But by any standard this

is a political decision to allow that march through that area where it causes such political offence, and the consequences of it are most certainly political.

PM And the consequences of not letting it through would have been a lot of dead people very probably.

T Well I find that very very hard to believe.

PM Well John you haven't seen the reports I have then. You've been watching television. You know what it's like, you know what these people \_\_\_\_\_ if the marches that are coming tomorrow were going to go through there as well 50,000 people, what would you think that would have happened?

T But they wouldn't have got through surely.

PM Really, why not?

T Because the RUC would stop them

PM How many soldiers do you think we've got there?

T I don't know how many you have

PM \_\_\_\_\_ mid Ulster and even then you couldn't be certain. They would have come across the fields. They don't walk down the high street and say "Oh gosh there's a soldier, I'll go back". Its not that way there and it hasn't been for a long time. And one of the problems with the RUC is that consistently for a very long time the RUC has actually been under attack from a large part of the nationalist community so the thought that they should be under the direct control of British Ministers would not have helped over recent months.

T Yes. Well I hear what you are saying. I think that the effect of this decision is political in a major way. However, we can't undo it now that its taken and I suppose we have just got to try and learn what we can from it. One of the lessons I would say is that I believe we can learn is that a commission should be set up immediately to deal with these sort of decisions which is one which has a wider consequence and a wider remit

than the Chief Constable has acting on his own on a police basis.

Because this isn't purely a policing matter, this is a policing matter that has major political implications. I think that we know that we have a problem on the Ormeau road tomorrow and I would like to know whether this march is going to be allowed to go through as well. You can tell me that.

PM I don't know. No decision has been made. Those decisions have yet to be made. I asked exactly the same question in the last few moments and no decision has yet been made.

T Anyway, what I would like to ask is that you would consider the establishment of a commission to look at this question of marches urgently so that we don't have a situation where we have a repeat performance of this every year from now on. The people in the Garvaghy Road feel extremely exposed. The fact that force seems to have won the day on the part of the loyalists in this case makes many Catholics feel extremely insecure in their homes in Northern Ireland at the present time.

PM Well enough of them are feeling so insecure they seem to be causing trouble elsewhere.

T Well some of them are being put out of their homes. We know in North Belfast today, and we have had a loyalist killing, perhaps not authorised, I don't know. But there is a deep sense of insecurity amongst the Catholic community now in Northern Ireland and this is something that is political in a strong \_\_\_\_\_ is not a matter for the Chief Constable alone to cope with no more than the Commissioner of the Guards could cope with in a equivalent situation here. This is-----

PM Well we are talking of two different things. We are talking of street control which is the responsibility of the Chief Constable. I hope we are clear between us what our respective views are on that. I do want to find a way to cope with the sensitivities of both communities and I am looking to see what independent involvement there are and I hope to say something in a few days. But I need to find out exactly what happened, how it happened, when it happened and what would have happened if alternative mechanisms had been in force. So I don't want to go snap on any particular way of dealing with it at the present time. But I do want to

examine how best we can deal with it to try and cope with this sort of problem in the future. It was much though I regret the fact that it is so, marching seems to be something deep in the temperament and we have had over 300 marches this year. This one has caused trouble, the other 299 hadn't.

T I know you can understand that this will be seen as a victory for Dr. Paisley and David Trimble - a victory over the nationalist community.

PM I don't think that they see it that way from all I hear. I mean, what actually happened when the limited march went through at the end was quite different from what was expected at the beginning. And I certainly neither expect nor hope for any form of triumphalism from anyone.

T Yes.

PM I mean perceptions, I can't control perceptions. But I think those perceptions would be wrong. I think everybody should be shaking by what has happened over the last few days. It makes one realise how fragile everything is. I must say to you John, we have learnt to speak

fairly frankly with one another and I freely concede that some of the people have behaved appallingly on the Protestant side. I don't deny that for a second and I have made that point very clear publicly and privately over the last few days. Indeed, I did so in the House of Commons yesterday and I will do so again. But I have to say to you it isn't entirely one-sided. It was complete intransigence by some of the normal residents of the Garvaghy road moved away some pretty hardline people took their place. They weren't remotely interested in reaching any accommodation. It was extremely convenient to some people to have this conflict built up and I have no doubt that Sinn Féin and the IRA are rubbing their hands with glee at the outcome.

T Absolutely. That's right. That's why I am beside myself

PM And I very much suspect that they were involved. I don't know that yet, I haven't seen all the reports.

T Absolutely and that's precisely why I am so deeply troubled by all of this because it is a victory in practice for the IRA. Its a victory for all the things that you and I have stood against.

PM I know, but we should be saying that. It isn't all one-sided. We ought to make the point that the IRA are in the backroom as well creating this trouble and people have been stupid enough to take their bait.

T Yes

PM But it isn't.

T Could I just say we are not going to solve any problems in this conversation. But I think it was very important that we should have the conversation particularly when such a difficult situation has developed that we should talk.

PM Well I am sorry that you were kept waiting a long time.

T Well I am not revisiting that all. I am just saying that it was important we should talk anyway, whether it takes an hour or two to get it.

PM Well I had been sitting by the phone for the last 20 minutes or so myself.

I don't know what happened, I don't know why we couldn't get one another. Its certainly the case that I wasn't available until 9.30pm and I'm sorry if there was a misunderstanding.

T OK. That's not the point I'm making really now. What I want to convey to you is a sense that these events may sew in the minds of nationalists and indeed the minds of many others that, if you can assemble enough people and put on enough pressure the forces of order will concede the field to you. Now that is a feeling that I believe has got some considerable strength from today's events and we must ensure that we do everything possible to reverse that feeling and to assure people that that is not the case. Now how that can be done operationally is a matter that you're better in a position to decide because you have the operational responsibilities with the aid of the RUC. But it would be very dangerous to politics if a feeling were to go any further that numbers and force rules the day.

PM Well there's force both ways.

T I know that.

PM No, no, let me finish.

T We stood against the IRA and there is nobody in any doubt about our position on that.

PM I am not just talking about the IRA. I mean there was force and intransigence in not letting the march through. I know these marches are provocative but in the traditions in Northern Ireland and indeed of the United Kingdom people do demonstrate and they do march and when there was force stopping that march I didn't hear any complaints except from the Protestants.

T Well I kept quiet about that because I knew that any support for what you were doing from this side of the border while the RUC were holding the line would be extremely unhelpful and provocative so we said nothing at all.

PM Yes, but in terms of force and things not prevailing, since there is a tradition of marching you could equally argue what the RUC should have done straight away was made sure that the march could go through speedily and immediately and when they were stopped for fear of damage to Catholic homes I got no complaints. That is the point that I am making.

T I know.

PM And in the end, they did it because there was a larger fear for Catholic homes. I have not myself spoken to the Chief Constable and I don't know whether Paddy has or not, I certainly haven't spoken to the Chief Constable and what his concern has been throughout is to avoid bloodshed and mass damage and despite all the difficulties and immense provocation and all sorts of missiles and things being thrown at the RUC by both sides he has actually achieved that.

T Yes. I understand that. Could we talk again because I am worried that this situation could evolve in a bad direction and hopefully it won't. But

it could and I would like to feel that we could talk again, maybe after the weekend.

PM Sure, of course, we can John.

T Just to take the temperature of the situation.

PM Of course we can. I hope by the weekend the temperature will have gone down.

T Well I sincerely hope so to.

PM We can't guarantee it, but I hope so.

T OK.

PM Bye.