



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH DERMOT AHERN

September 30, 2005
Dundalk, Ireland

Interviewers

James Sterling Young
Stephen F. Knott

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TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH DERMOT AHERN

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Young: Well, we had no idea when we scheduled this trip that we would be arriving at an important moment in Irish history.

Ahern: Sure.

Young: So this has made it very exciting and has also introduced a current dimension, a contemporary dimension, to the history of this question.

Ahern: Sure.

Young: We've talked already with John Hume, with Garret FitzGerald, Sean Donlon, Al [Albert] Reynolds, and we've been here several days. We're leaving tomorrow is it?

Knott: Yes.

Young: To go back to the States.

Knott: We talked with Michael Lillis as well.

Young: Michael Lillis as well, who came in from Brazil—

Ahern: Yes.

Young: —for this. One of the things Ted told me very early, when we were discussing the possibilities for this project, which is being done by the University of Virginia, not by the Senator, and not by his staff. He came to us to ask us to do this. We've done oral histories for [Jimmy] Carter. That was our first one, Jimmy Carter's White House. We completed one with [Ronald] Reagan—we have now completed our Reagan Presidency Project. George H. W. Bush. Now we're engaged in a [William Jefferson] Clinton Project, in a comprehensive oral history of the Clinton Presidency. So Ted and his advisors came to us and asked whether we'd like to discuss doing a project of history—

Ahern: Sure.

Young: —and it was set up in his time. He's establishing a center, the Edward M. Kennedy Center for the Study of the United States Senate, and these documents, with his papers, will go to that when he establishes it.

Ahern: Yes, yes.

Young: So it's not just his biography and his public career, it's also the politics of his time and the Senate, which has changed a great deal since he first came there 43 years ago. So we'd like you to talk about your connection with him, with the issues with which he's been concerned, and how you see things evolving from this point forward.

Ahern: Well, I'm in national politics 18 years, since '87. Particularly from where I live [Dundalk], the whole issue of the conflict in the north has been very acute in that this area was used to—In the '69-'70 period, when Catholics were more or less burned out of their homes, in Belfast particularly, they came across the border and came to here. They were housed in this area. By and large, this would have been the biggest center across the border and would have been the first contact point. So for years and years this area has been known as an area which would be—I mean it's called bandit country. The town itself was called "El Paso" by the British media, the tabloid media. It got a bad name because a lot of the—well, some of the people who came across the border used the border then as an opportunity to launch attacks on the security forces in the north. Personally, it could be said that I'm referring to the last sentence! Just to give you some—I'll get on to Kennedy in a minute, but—You see, [John] Hume, the Hume-[Gerry] Adams talks started in '88.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Hume met with Adams at the behest of Father Alec Reid. Father Alec Reid approached Charlie Haughey, who was the Irish Prime Minister at the time, if Fianna Fáil, my party, would meet with Sinn Féin. This is all documented in a book; I think you should read it. It's *The Fight for Peace*. It's by Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick. It documents the initial contacts.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Martin Manseragh, myself, and another man from my party met with Sinn Féin here in 1988, secretly, to mirror what Hume and Adams were doing. The fact that we were meeting only came out maybe ten or twelve years later; they were top-secret talks. The whole issue was to try and convince the Sinners to move away from violence. That's the background relation, from my very start.

Young: So this was going on and Martin Manseragh and yourself and the other gentleman?

Ahern: I was only involved at the very start with those talks. They stopped very quickly because the Hume-Adams talks stopped quite quickly thereafter.

Young: Yes, yes. That was when it became part of—

Ahern: There were some talks actually in this town; the talks took place in the Redemptorist Church, which is not too far from where we are—

Young: Yes.

Ahern: —and facilitated by Father Alec Reid, but again, it's all documented in that book.

Young: Right.

Ahern: But one of the reasons I'm telling you all this is because this area, like Suffolk particularly—Ted Kennedy was one of those people who was very much behind the move toward the International Fund for Ireland, the setting up of the International Fund for Ireland. It is still in situ and supported by and large by the U.S. Administration, but also a number of European countries as well. Canada and New Zealand actually put in some money, but the International Fund for Ireland, of which Ted Kennedy and others were instrumental in pushing at the behest of John Hume—He approached the Four Horsemen, as they were called [Edward M. Kennedy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Thomas P. O'Neill, and Hugh Carey] and the International Fund was put together and started off in a very small way.

A lot of what you see in the town here—this town is doing very well now, but when I was first elected, it was a for sale town. It was known as the for sale town because, literally, on the main street, every property was for sale. It was very difficult to do business because of the perception that it had. But the International Fund, of which Ted Kennedy was one of the movers, was the catalyst for a lot of low-level economic and social development that took place as sort of reconciliation and to this day has been extremely successful. From that point of view, obviously Ted Kennedy would have been very instrumental. People like Garret FitzGerald and Donlon could give you more about the older history.

From my own point of view, in relation to dealing with him, particularly since I became Foreign Minister, he has been absolutely pivotal in dealing with the reality rather than the perception of what the difficulty on the island is. That's why I would have been in very close contact with him in the last number of months, more than anyone. I don't think there's anyone who has a clearer understanding of the rights and the wrongs and the even-handed approach that is necessary in this. When I became Minister September of last year, I traveled to Washington. I've been a keen observer of all of this for many years. I was quite astounded at the misconception or the very biased view that some of the Irish American leading figures in America, in Washington and New York, but also in the Congress and Senate, had in relation to the issue of Ireland.

Young: Could you say what that misperception was?

Ahern: Well, I was quite astounded at the fact that there was such huge support for Sinn Féin, sort of unquestioning support for Sinn Féin in that they, the leaders of Sinn Féin, were lorded

amongst most of the Irish Americans, who by and large felt that they were genuine. I say this as somebody who has met them for 18 years and—

Young: Yes.

Ahern: When I came back from the U.S., I said to my Prime Minister that we really needed to do a bit more in relation to the diplomatic intervention by us with Senators and Congressmen in that quite a lot of them had too blinkered a view about what was going on and what was wrong and what was needed to be done. I have to say that the influence of Ted Kennedy over the last, particularly, year has been absolutely pivotal. The U.S. Administrations, both the Clinton Administration and indeed the [George W.] Bush Administration, have been very good in background stuff, assisting the governments. What we've tried to do over the last years, to ensure that the three governments are basically singing on the one hymn sheet—I have to say that Ted Kennedy has been instrumental in that.

Every time there has been a development, I took it upon myself to telephone him and tell him what they had done and what they were doing. He would be on to me and my Ambassador to find out, in relation to incidents such as the murder of Robert McCartney. He was instrumental in getting Adams the visa, which was very important at that time; but equally so on the other side; he was very clear that he wasn't going to meet Adams and [Roger] Cole recently in relation to St. Patrick's Day. That, again, was absolutely crucial because it showed leadership amongst the Senators and Congressmen, the Irish Senators and Congressmen, because it showed that he was not taking on face value what people were saying.

As I said, just to give you the sequence—I think it's fairly important: The Northern Bank raid happened—we had our discussions with the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party] and Sinn Féin, and we were traveling very well until the end of December. Those discussions, if you may remember—on the 8th of December the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister, [Tony] Blair, published what the two governments up in Belfast felt were the bones of the agreement. We had agreed on 95 percent of what was to be the position. The only remaining issues were of photographs that the DUP were insisting on and the issue of continued criminality by the provision of the IRA [Irish Republican Army], and the talks broke down. On the 20th of December, the bank raid happened. We published the documents on the 8th of December. The 20th of December [of 2004] the bank raid happened.

We met Sinn Féin in January and said quite clearly to them that we were not going to deal any further with them unless and until they dealt with the two issues: decommissioning and an end to power ventures and to criminality. We told them very bluntly in a very tough meeting, a very touchy meeting, in government buildings. We worked the Irish American Congressmen and Senators. I went over to Washington very quickly after the Northern Bank raid but before the McCartney murder [in 1971] and before it came out that some of the money that was used in the Northern Bank raid came public here in the Republic down in Cork, where some of it started to come into circulation. I was out in Washington and met with Ted Kennedy in his office; John McCain came into the meeting also and we met a couple of times. In fact, we were interrupted by a vote. They had to go and we agreed to meet the next day. So we continued with our discussions, but I met with all the Irish Americans.

I have to say, I had grave difficulty explaining to them that the Irish position, the Irish government's position, where we were taking a very hard stance—we had said to Sinn Féin at that meeting in January that we weren't going to—whether we came back to discuss with them the issues in two weeks or in two years, it would still be the same two issues: an end to full decommissioning, and an end to power ventures and of criminality. I was explaining this to people like Ted Kennedy and all the other people, Peter King and Jim Walsh and them all, and some nonpoliticians, but leading Irish American people who would be part of the circuit.

I had grave difficulty explaining to them that we were absolutely convinced that our security services, both north and south of the border, but indeed our own ones here—whatever suspicion you might have about the Northern Security Services, we were absolutely adamant that this had been created by the bank, that the bank raid had been carried out by the Provisional IRA and people associated with the Provisional IRA, that it couldn't have happened without Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness knowing that something was going to go down. They might not necessarily have known the full details of it, but there was absolutely no doubt that it was being done with their knowledge and their acquiescence.

My Ambassador and people had grave difficulty convincing not only the nonpoliticians but Irish American supporters of the long peace process issue who didn't believe, who said to me bluntly, "Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness have been coming out here for ten years and you know..." One man said to us, "You know, I can see a liar when they are talking to me and I don't think they lied to me." Indeed, some of the Senators and Congressmen—to be fair, Kennedy particularly was very questioning about our view. There were others who would say, "I'm not a lawyer by profession..." but others were saying, "But you have no proof." I had to say, "Look, this isn't a court of law. This is our security services saying from the intelligence that they have—They may never be able to prove it in a court of law, but from their intelligence it was quite clear from the contacts and the people that they have who tell them, that as far as they are concerned, it was committed—" They weren't believing that. They said, "Ah, no, no. These people are not telling us lies. We'd know if they were." That was generally the attitude.

Now, to be fair, Kennedy wasn't of that attitude. He was much more questioning of it, but he was also questioning of our position. I was conscious that you couldn't prove it in a court of law at that time. Whether we'll ever be able to prove it or not, who knows?

Young: Yes.

Ahern: There was a program on a couple of weeks ago which went through what happened in the bank raid. It was the most sophisticated, most organized bank raid that you could ever come across. It was an amazing one, the way they carried it out, the way they kept the people hostage, etc. Kennedy was very questioning. As a result of that he adopted the attitude at that time that—to a certain extent a lot of the other Senators and Congressmen would follow his lead.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: There is no doubt about that. What happened then was the McCartney murder, then subsequently about 5 million euros of the £26 million sterling appeared in various locations in the south of Ireland. I don't know if you know this. No?

Young: No. I had not heard that before.

Ahern: It was comical. You should try and find out anyway, but it was comical. You know the term "laundered"?

Young: Oh yes, oh yes.

Ahern: The guards, our police, got some information that there was somebody with some of this money in the railway station in Dublin. They went to the railway station and stopped this gentleman. He had a packet of washing powder in his possession; in the packet of washing powder were sterling notes from the Northern Bank raid.

Young: That gives "laundering" a new reality.

Ahern: But not only that. In different locations in Cork, which is in the south of the country, they raided houses and raided this man called [Ted] Cunningham, who runs sort of a mortgage company, a loan company. They raided a house of the chairman of the Bank of Scotland, which is a very big bank, a man called Phil Flynn, a leading trade unionist who was a member of a number of governments and bodies. They raided his house.

[REDACTED] Again, our security services would say that this is the case.

Young: You will have an opportunity to review this transcript.

Ahern: —they dealt with people in Bulgaria.

Young: I see.

Ahern: Indeed, on the program, the two Bulgarians they dealt with were walking the field where it was intended that a shopping center of 20 million euros was going to be built with some of the money. Now the Bulgarians said they didn't know where the money was coming from, but anyway.

[REDACTED] a Sinn Féin member was caught burning money in his house. The guards, our police, got a phone call from neighbors of his. He was burning it in his fireplace. This all happened in a 24-hour space, but he was actually burning pound notes, sterling, from the bank raid. He was burning money in his grate, in his open fire; it was going up the chimney and some of the notes were fluttering around. I mean it's comical, but this is what happened. So there was a panic. They were getting rid of all of this money because that's the way they get rid of this money, but it's felt that most of the money has all been. . . .

The reason I'm telling you all this is because that actually proved, without a shadow of doubt, what I had been saying to all the Irish Americans, most of the very skeptical people of the story I was telling. I've been involved in this process for 20 years, albeit at a lower level than perhaps Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. They are the sort of sexy names, but I was conscious that when I was going over to Washington talking to all these Senators and the leading Irish Americans who had been talking to McGuinness and Adams for ten years, they didn't really know me. I would be speaking for the government but even still, they weren't prepared to believe me in my first visit, but in the subsequent visits, I was able to go and say I told you so.

To be fair to Kennedy, Kennedy was—It confirmed what we were saying and his attitude, particularly around St. Patrick's Day, where he refused to meet Adams and McGuinness or he met them at McCartney's sisters, where he—Again, at every twist and turn we would have let Kennedy know exactly, because we regarded him as the sort of linchpin of moderate Irish American opinion.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: And rational Irish American opinion. I'm not saying against any of the others, but to a certain extent there's—they see things through rose-tinted glasses.

Young: Right.

Ahern: I think they got a severe—I appreciate that the situation has changed post 9-11 in America and that was a big—You could quite clearly see that the American government administration and establishment were not going to put up with any sort of ambiguity in relation to whether these people were politicians or whether they were terrorists. They saw that as well. They saw that whatever good will there was toward them in America was going to dissipate very quickly because the McCartney murder was just an appalling event.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Now, it was a pub brawl. There's no doubt it was a pub brawl. It wasn't an organized thing, but it was organized the minute it happened by thugs who were members of the IRA and Sinn Féin, undoubted, and the whole thing was orchestrated subsequently. The irony of all of this is that the McCartney family were actually strong Sinn Féin supporters. So this whole thing of the IRA being there to protect Catholics—Now, in a way, the IRA are ending out to be the oppressors of the Catholic community.

So both Kennedy and particularly Hillary [Rodham] Clinton were very strong on the McCartney issue and they—Because we would have given them, as far as we were concerned, the full facts in relation to the issue without any of the gloss, they orchestrated the visit of the McCartneys to America, met them, adopted a very strong stance. For instance, there was an incident recently where one of the McCartney friends was beaten up, very badly beaten up, by a crowd. Now of course the Sinn Féin crowd will say, "Well, we don't know who they are," but they were people associated with Sinn Féin. Their house has been continuously picketed by a crowd of women. Again, of course, Sinn Féin said they knew nothing about it, but the continued focus by Kennedy

and Clinton, in relation to McCartney again, is instrumental. But the point I'm making is the recent attack on the friend of the McCartneys. We would have immediately told Kennedy and the other Senators and Congressmen so that they knew the facts about it.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: At every twist and turn, we would have been in contact with him. During the summer I was in contact with Kennedy when I was on my holidays, actually. Immediately after the IRA statement—I was on holidays at the time—I flew back from my holidays in France to Ireland for a day to be here for the IRA statement. I flew back to France and I rang him from the side of the road in France, me on my holidays, to tell him what our attitude was in relation to the IRA statement, which was that the words were very fine, but we want to see the deeds. We've seen the deed this week and it's been independently verified. I rang Kennedy a couple of days ago to say to him that our attitude was yes, this is now what we want, a full decommissioning. I rang him to thank him for his support.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: I said to him that on behalf of the Irish government, his stance in relation to the Northern Bank raid, in relation to—The last nine months were particularly pivotal because Tony Blair said, in 10 Downing Street after the Northern Bank raid but before the McCartney murder, before the laundering came out, he said that there had been “creative ambiguity” in the peace process.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: I have to say I was somewhat surprised when he said it, but he was acknowledging the fact that to a certain extent a blind eye has been turned because there had been a number of raids in Northern Ireland. There was a raid on a big chain called Iceland, a million euros worth or a million pounds worth of goods were taken. There was a bank raid on another major sort of retail outlet, Makro. Again, a million sterling taken. These were all attributed, but not proven, against the IRA. Nonetheless, the negotiations still went down. So the line in the sand came with the Northern Bank raid. It didn't really convince Irish America from what we saw. It was only when the proof of the pudding with the McCartney murder, which abhorred everybody, then the money-laundering aspect, which clearly showed that this was the proof—The Irish Americans were saying to me, “Well, where have you the proof?” I said to them, “Of course, it's not a court of law.”

But for the tough attitude, if he [Kennedy] had relented and if he had allowed—If he had met with Adams particularly and McGuinness during St. Patrick's Day, in our view, it would have been detrimental because it kept the pressure on them. It showed that the doors were not going to be opened.

Young: Right. After your first meeting with him, this is after the Northern Bank robbery but before the McCartney murder, when you were on that visit talking with him and other leading

Irish Americans who were not politicians but other people in the Congress, did you see anybody in the executive branch? Were they involved in your visit at all?

Ahern: No, no, but the Ambassador would have been in contact with all of these people. I was there to meet with the Irish American representatives.

Young: So there was no *official* government action on the part of the United States or diplomatic action that—

Ahern: Oh, well, I would have—I met Mitchell Reese. Yes, I did. Sorry, I met Mitchell Reese, who is the special representative. I did meet him on that occasion, yes.

Young: Yes. OK.

Ahern: I did. In fact, I hosted a lunch for him. Sorry about that. Yes. I forgot about that.

Young: But not the Administration—

Ahern: Again, whatever I articulated to him would have been exactly what I said to them, too.

Young: But the important thing was Kennedy's leadership of opinion on this issue?

Ahern: Yes.

Young: Not any official action by the United States government in relation to it?

Ahern: Well, to be fair, Mitchell Reese and the—I'm trying to remember, did I meet with—who's the second in command to Condoleezza Rice? [Bob] Zoellick. Zoellick.

Young: OK.

Ahern: Yes. Condoleezza Rice wasn't there. I'm nearly sure I met him as well.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Again, we would have—Yes, I filled him in. Who was in the White House? I can't—that was definitely in January as well.

Young: You were informing them?

Ahern: I was informing them about the Irish government.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: But again, that was only me. That would be done on a fairly constant basis by our Ambassador. We work the system, you know, literally on a daily basis.

Young: Right. Right.

Ahern: And keep his contacts informed. Yes, I did meet Zoellick and another man. It's all documented in writing. I just can't remember perfectly. But we regard—Martin McGuinness is over there at the moment in the U.S. and he's swanning around in the glory of the IRA decommissioning. A lot of the American Senators and Congressmen who are sympathetic to the Irish situation are saying, "This is great." I mean, we're all very thankful for them stopping killing people, basically.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: I don't know if you know the Irish sort of—I have to be careful now. Sometimes these things might come back and haunt you, but there is this very basic view that it's the Brits against the Irish and the armed struggle is to get them out. You know, bomb them out of it and—

Young: Yes.

Ahern: People like Hume and all of that generation of Kennedy and the Horsemen—Hume, in my view, would have been pivotal in changing the attitudes of most Irish people that all this thing about a united Ireland and Irish unity, which we all aspire to—it makes no sense for a small island to be divided. The borders, you see the border—this is where we are and the border is here.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: So you're very near it. My neighbors and my cousin live on the border. It makes no sense for the border to be there, but the IRA and the view in America—if you go into any Irish pub in America, "Up the IRA!" and all this. What the IRA has done is push Irish unity further and further apart by their actions. I accept that there were times, like in '69 and '70, where they were required because the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary], the police service in Northern Ireland were not doing what they should have been doing. Why? Because they were a totally biased police force. Unfortunately, the further you are away from the problem, the more of a black-and-white view you have about the problem. It's not as easy as that.

Hume changed the view of most Irish people living on the island who have a nationalist outlook, and that is that you can't just unify the territory. You have to unify the *people*. I think someone like Kennedy followed that very much and didn't accept the sort of "Wrap the green flag around me" attitude that others would have. Now people in the north and particularly people in Sinn Féin would say, "Well, that's all very well for you to say in the Republic, you know. We have a free state; you don't have the problem." But somebody like me and somebody living on the border, like the Sinners, find it very hard to criticize me because they know that *I* know what it's like.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Because there would be a strong Sinn Féin presence here, yet I hammered them in the election. In recent times, I've topped the poll by a long mile here in this constituency. They are strong, but I'm just saying that it's that attitude. If you had a clean slate, my party, which by far is the biggest party, we average 35 to 40 percent of the vote. There's no other party in Europe that gets as big a vote. Out of 166 TDs [Teachta Dala], we have the guts of 78, 79, like Sinn Féin of 5, you know. Yet if you go to America, my party isn't mentioned in America. It's Sinn Féin. That's our fault in a way, in that we didn't look after the American—But again, you see, the story that we would have said when we go to America isn't sexy. It isn't "Bomb the Brits out," I guess.

So it's the thinking, sort of American, in the guise of someone like Ted Kennedy that has been absolutely pivotal—That's why, over the last year particularly, I've kept in very close contact with Ted Kennedy. Any time anything happened, we would have, either personally or through our embassy, been in very regular contact with him, because we regarded him as pivotal, and particularly St. Patrick's Day.

The fact that he refused to meet even the most ardent supporters of Sinn Féin like Peter King and people like that—They backed his position. It's not that they backed his position, but they went along with his position and even they took a tough stance that they shouldn't have. So the cold breeze. I would say for the benefit of your research and the Administration, both Administrations have been absolutely pivotal, under Clinton particularly has to be said. This Administration is still very good. Mitchell Reese and the man before were very good. Richard Haass.

Young: Yes, yes.

Ahern: Very good, and they were very good.

Young: Was he in the office at the time?

Ahern: No, no.

Young: He was at foreign relations in New York?

Ahern: Yes. Yes, I met him in his office in New York or Washington. I can't remember.

Young: New York probably.

Ahern: New York, yes. Then Mitchell Reese as well. I was only off the phone there yesterday with Mitchell Reese and their position was very good. The running up to St. Patrick's Day was a big issue about—that's when I met Mitchell Reese. It was about whether Adams and McGuinness would get a visa and all of this. Even though we couldn't come out publicly and say that we were part of that decision, we gave our view to Mitchell Reese and his officials that whatever decision they made, not to make martyrs of the Sinners in order to allow them to say, "We're the victims and they're all against us," which is exactly what they want.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: So the American administrations were very acute. They allowed them in, but not into the White House and not to—The President wasn't going to meet them. As far as he was concerned, after the McCartney murder and the Northern Bank raid, there was no way. There was no way in the wide earthly world he was going to meet—

Young: And he would not be at the St. Patrick's—?

Ahern: No. He made it clear, no matter what. To be fair, he made it clear and there was never any question. We just said, "That's fine, but make sure you don't make martyrs of them in the decision that you make." It worked out very well because equally so, Kennedy and we had lobbied strongly, Kennedy and his people and a lot of the other Congressmen and Senators, about what had happened with the bank raid and that.

Young: The statement by Kennedy that he would not attend and he would not see Gerry Adams had big play in the U.S. press.

Ahern: Yes.

Young: So that the message got out.

Ahern: The message got out. And that's very important. For years and years in the Irish peace process, it was the weak Irish against the strong British. Really what has been pivotal in the last 15 years has been the American involvement, under Clinton initially. Bush has other priorities, but nonetheless, Mitchell Reese is very active. There are two elements to it. There's the administration and there's the Congress and Senators.

Young: But Kennedy, from early on, has been instrumental in persuading the executive.

Ahern: Yes. During the Clinton time.

Young: Well, even earlier. During Carter.

Ahern: Yes, of course.

Young: Carter was the first American President to take a stand—

Ahern: Yes.

Young: —and to promise financial aid if—

Ahern: Yes, that's right.

Young: —the thing went satisfactorily. I'm sure Kennedy was behind that. It's interesting from our point of view because Kennedy is not on the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate. He

has no official brief in the Senate or very little for dealing with matters of this nature. So it's a question of his leadership outside of his official duties that makes it very interesting to us.

Ahern: Yes. His interest in this is because of his Irishness—

Young: Yes, it totally is.

Ahern: —and because of the strong—You know, for someone who—I'd be surprised he had slowed up so much from previous times, yet he seems to be so active. Any time I wanted him, I was able to get him. His people are very clued in as to—You know he has particular people earmarked within his staff to—

Young: Right. Did you have any contact with Jean Kennedy [Smith] when she was Ambassador?

Ahern: Yes, I did, yes. I did, again but as Ambassador, just as any Ambassador would do. You know I would have—I'm a Minister of eight and a half years, so I don't know—How long is she gone?

Young: She left in when? 19—

Knott: Ninety-seven or eight.

Ahern: Yes, yes. Well I became a Minister in '97. I was a Minister previously for a short—

Young: She was invested during that period when the Gerry Adams visa—

Ahern: And she would have been—

Young: —and the Joe Cahill.

Ahern: She would—yes. She would have been very pivotal in all of that, in getting all of that done and that helped. But you see, it's all very well, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness swanning around in the White House at all the receptions and swanning around up in government buildings here. It used to gall me to see him going in and out of government buildings, because they were a part of an organization which they unashamedly said—one of their members unashamedly said at one of their Ard Fheiseanna, one of their annual conferences, that they would proceed with the armament in the one hand and the ballot box in the other.

I keep reminding them of that, and they don't like it. To a large extent, that was the "creative ambiguity" that was allowed up until January—December and January—when the Irish government surprised the British government. It surprised the DUP. The DUP said it to us: "We were shocked as to how strong the Irish government were against the Sinners." A lot of it was because we had been in negotiation with them up to last December, very close to an agreement and quite clearly—Just a matter of ten days later, the bank raid happened. Quite clearly a well-organized, had-been-planned-for-months bank raid had taken place, which we believe was

created—I think we’ve proved—We might never prove it in court, that’s the problem with money laundering. There’s nobody in the country except the most stupid people who don’t realize that it was carried out by the IRA or somebody associated with the IRA. So, only because we took that very tough stance—if we had not been backed by Irish Americans, it would have been very difficult.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: Pivotal in that were Clinton and Kennedy, but also Hillary Clinton, too.

Young: Yes, she was, too.

Knott: Are you optimistic about the future?

Ahern: I am, yes. I think they have in no way made the final decision. There was always a fear that, particularly after the bank raid, that what we were going to do is—Quite clearly they are going into the political. The vast majority are going the political route, but they were feeding off the creative ambiguity.

All of these bank raids were happening and various incidents were happening and they were financing. They were financing themselves for—not only for a political sort of future, but also, they say, for pensioning off some of their people, to get them to stop. We have no doubt that this was all going to happen, but it was going on so long. Seventeen years. I’m not saying that Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness and all the people around them were not—it was a difficult job to go down this route. They have accepted the consent principle. I mean, we changed our constitution with the Good Friday Agreement. They have acknowledged that the people of Northern Ireland can determine the future. Even for my party, who proposed the deletion in our constitution of the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland as part of the Good Friday Agreement, we had a referendum done there on my party. The Prime Minister asked the people to delete Articles II and III, which the Unionists said was an aggressive claim to their territory.

Young: Yes.

Ahern: We, in effect, encouraged the people to vote for that, as did most of the political parties. So Sinn Féin and the IRA have accepted the content of the consent principle, which is a dramatic change. They accept that an executive type of government and a Parliament and Assembly are part of the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore, they are part—In effect, they are acknowledging what they call the statelet of Northern Ireland until its constitutional position changes.

In the history of the Irish “physical force tradition,” as they call it, that’s the first organization who’ve actually handed out guns. I mean my party came out of the civil war. My party in the ’30s went into the Parliament, they say, with guns in their pockets. My party was the precursor of Sinn Féin. [Eamon] De Valera was Sinn Féin but formed Fianna Fáil, then went into government. The discussions that we had with Adams here in this town with Martin Manseragh were that you people should be doing what De Valera and Cole did in the ’20s and ’30s, move from the physical force tradition to the constitutional republicanism.

To a certain extent, these people have besmirched the name of republicanism. My party would be a constitutional republican party, but unfortunately, it wasn't the done thing in recent years to say you were republican. It wasn't the done thing to say you were in favor of a united Ireland because a lot of people down in the Republic say, "A united Ireland? What would we want with that crowd?" If you did a poll on that here, it would be an interesting poll, because the Republic is doing so well that people really don't want the problem of the north. That has been the case for quite a long time. So unfortunately, they have besmirched the idea of a united Ireland. People like John Hume convincing people like Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy have been pivotal.

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