

Interview With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom by
David Frost of the British Broadcasting Corporation in Weston-under-
Lizard, United Kingdom

May 16, 1998

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Mr. Frost. Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. President, it's a great joy to be talking. And let's begin on the subject that's on everybody's minds today, the subject of Northern Ireland. The vote may be more perilously close than was hoped a week or 2 ago. What is your message that each of you have right now to persuade doubting Unionists or doubting Catholics to persuade? How would you both begin?

Prime Minister Blair. I think it's in many ways a battle between fear and emotion on the one hand and reason and hope on the other. And the fear and the emotion is totally understandable, but it is important that people vote for reason and hope. And I say that because people ask me for reassurances on certain of the key items of the agreement. They say, "Reassure us that the IUC is not going to be disbanded or stop being a proper police force." I give that reassurance. That will be plain.

I give the reassurance, the absolute commitment that, if the cross-community provisions in the agreement to exclude people from office if they engage in violence, if those don't work, then they will be changed. That will be in the legislation. I give the explicit commitment to people that decommissioning will be a factor that we take into account, a factor there, specified in the legislation, so that, if people aren't abiding by the decommissioning arrangements of the independent commission on decommissioning, then that can mean their exclusion or removal from office.

I give the explicit commitment that people, whether in the assembly or the shadow assembly, cannot sit in office in Northern Ireland if they're engaged in the ballot box and the gun as a twin strategy.

Now, all those reassurances I can give. But in the end, it depends whether people are really wanting to give themselves the chance for stability and prosperity in the future, because the alternative is not where we are now. The alternative is for Northern Ireland to slip back. So I hope that people will take that chance for the future.

Mr. Frost. What's the reassurance? What's the message you want to get across?

President Clinton. Well, of course, the United States is the home of the largest Irish diaspora, you know, both Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics. And so I suppose outside of the people involved, we care more about it than any other people. And I've worked hard to create the conditions within which the Irish could make their own peace. And what I would like to say is, first, I'm convinced there will be a great deal of increased interest in and investment in and partnership with Northern Ireland if this matter can be carried forward.

Secondly, I have made it as clear as I can that anyone who abandons the peace, if this agreement is embraced, anybody who returns to violence is never going to be a friend of the United States. We won't tolerate it. We won't support it. We will do everything we can to affirmatively oppose it.

But finally—I remember when I went there in December of '95. I remember the looks on the faces of the people, especially the young people, the schoolchildren I spoke with, both the Protestant and the Catholic children. And I'd just like to ask the voters to imagine what will happen if they vote no, and what do they really have to lose by voting yes, by giving this a chance? I mean, their leaders came up with this plan. Prime Minister Blair worked very hard on it. Prime Minister Ahern did. But the leaders in Northern Ireland agreed to this plan. What have they got to lose, really, by trying it? Nothing. But they have a great deal to lose by walking away, and I hope that they won't walk away.

Mr. Frost. And you mention, in terms of investment and so on, there are ways in which the new Northern Ireland—you could help the new Northern Ireland?

President Clinton. Oh, absolutely. Of course, we try every year now. We have an International Fund for Ireland. We have a very active group of American citizens from both the Protestant and Catholic communities, Irish citizens who try to increase investment. But I can tell you that the wave of elation that will sweep the friends

of Ireland in the United States, should this be accepted, will be enormous. And there will just be a lot more willingness to get involved here and try to help build a future.

Mr. Frost. And in terms of the people, Prime Minister, who say, well, you've got, on the one hand, Sinn Fein saying this is a step toward a united Ireland; you've got David Trimble saying, on the other hand, that this strengthens the Union. How can both be true?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I think the point is the principle of consent—in other words, that you can argue your case, whether it's for Northern Ireland remaining inside the U.K. or a united Ireland—the principle of consent means you have to argue it by democracy, not violence. And so people are free to argue their case. But it's a way of arguing it that is peaceful.

And one of the strange things about the debate in Northern Ireland is that people aren't actually arguing now about the principle of consent. That was what, for 50, 60 years, divided people in Northern Ireland. People now accept that. They're not even arguing about the institutional structures, the cross-border bobbies, the Northern Ireland Assembly. That in a sense is agreed, as well. It is this fear and emotion, as I say. You see, prisoners is an example of it. And let me again try and go right to the heart of what I think people feel in Northern Ireland. They see the scenes of the Balcombe Street Gang or Michael Stone and they say, "Well, this is wrong," and the "no" campaign then say, "Oh well, the prisoners will be back on the street if you vote for this agreement."

Again, the facts are these: Michael Stone and the Balcombe Street Gang were allowed out under provisions on day release made many, many years ago before I even came to government. It had nothing to do with the agreement. Most of the prisoners now in jail in Northern Ireland will be out within a few years anyway. But they'll be out, of course, without the agreement and without stability if there's no vote.

So again, I understand the concerns that people have, but I do ask them to realize that if no is the vote next week, what is the future? What are we going to offer children in Northern Ireland?

President Clinton. You know, if I could just say sort of as an interested friend, an outside observer—as you know, I've been very involved in the Bosnian peace, in the Middle East peace process—I think, essentially, the people that are

for this want a better future for their children and don't want any more violence and like the fact that there is now a process which has been agreed upon for moving forward. If you really listen to the arguments of the people that are against it—and I've tried to listen very respectfully—it is that they still don't trust those on the other side because of all the things that have gone before.

In 1993 Yitzhak Rabin, right before we signed the agreement between Israel and the PLO, said to me, "I have spent my life as a soldier. I have killed a lot of these people, and they have killed a lot of my people. But," he said, "Mr. President, you don't make peace with your friends. You make peace, and then you make friends." And I think that's important here. But in Northern Ireland the people live much more closely together. They have in some ways—they haven't killed each other in the way the Bosnians did. With all the horrible things, they can get over this if they just will—it's a little bit of a leap of faith, but the risks of doing it are so much less than the risks of walking away.

Mr. Frost. And I think that example is a very relevant one, of Yitzhak Rabin, because that is the problem with the moderate Unionists, some of them, who've got concern. I think you've dealt with the point about the prisoners. You said that a lot of them would be coming out in the next few years anyway, and that links in with their fear of decommissioning of arms and that, therefore, there will be lots of killers running around with arms and so on. But how do you respond to that?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I respond to it by saying that we will make it quite clear, explicitly in the legislation, that the twin strategy of ballot box and gun is not going to be permitted. And that all the things, in terms of seats in the Northern Ireland executive, in terms of accelerated prisoner release, they can only happen if there's real peace, a real end to violence, an end to violence for good, not temporarily, permanently, an end to violence.

I think it's possible that we can achieve that. But we've got to achieve it with people really making this agreement work. And all the time that we spent trying to put this together, it was agonizingly difficult. And yet in the end, I think there is the will out there amongst people in Northern Ireland; there is the hope to make it work.

Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia

Mr. Frost. We'll come back to that subject before the end of the conversation. But you've been examining a lot of other issues and two issues have come up to take up a lot of your time at this conference. And obviously, one of them is India and, obviously, a slight difference of emphasis on what you think should be done and what you have done than the other members of G-8. Why do you feel the way you do, Mr. President?

President Clinton. Do you mean why do I think that we should not only condemn the Indian action but take some economic action against India?

Mr. Frost. Yes.

President Clinton. I just think we need to do as much as possible to make it clear that, in the world of today and tomorrow, it is simply unacceptable to build a nuclear arsenal. And it is unrealistic to believe you can build one and you won't use it under any circumstances. Therefore, the main purpose of doing it is to establish yourself as a great nation. That is not a way to define a nation's greatness in the 21st century. And I say that because I think the firmer we are here, the more likely we are to be able to persuade Pakistan, or perhaps other countries lining up behind Pakistan, that they should not test, that they should not try to become public members of the nuclear club. We need to move the world away from it.

I'm trying to get Russia to ratify START II now so we can dismantle our arsenals further and then go to START III and dismantle our arsenals further. I'm trying to take America and Russia in the opposite direction. I'm afraid in our own countries, we'll have people who say, "Oh, we better not do that if India and Pakistan and other countries are going to build up their arsenals." It's just—it's not the way to the future.

Mr. Frost. And so the message to Pakistan—there's rumors that they may be testing next week in western Baluchistan, or whatever—would be that you would take—you feel you should take the same action against them if they did?

President Clinton. Well, under our law, we'll have no choice. In other words, it's an automatic under our law. But what I would say to them is, help us work with you to find a way, first

of all, to guarantee your security without nuclear weapons, and secondly, to reconcile with India.

I mean, look at Pakistan and India. You've got one country with 950 million people, another country with nearly 140 million people. They are arguing principally over Kashmir, not entirely but principally. Now, if they could resolve this, if you look at the success of Indians and Pakistanis in the United Kingdom or in the United States and you look at the talent in those two countries and you realize, if they would liberate themselves from this argument between themselves, it is quite conceivable that for the next 50 years they could have the highest growth rates and not just economic success but the richest and most textured quality of life on the Indian subcontinent of any place on the globe. And so I think they should be imagining a different future for themselves, both of them.

Have the rest of us failed to appreciate them as much as we should have? Probably. Have we failed to acknowledge India the incredible achievement of maintaining 50 years of democracy under the most adverse conceivable circumstances? Probably. We should do better. But the answer is not for India to become a nuclear power and then for Pakistan to match it stride for stride, and then for China to be brought in to support the Pakistanis and move troops to the Indian border, and then for Russia to come in and recreate in a different context the conflicts of the cold war. It is a nutty way to go. It is not the way to chart the future.

Mr. Frost. And in fact, you spoke to the Indian Prime Minister. Did you think that the optimists might have a point when they say that now they've done this test; maybe they'll sign the nonproliferation and the test ban treaties; they just needed to do this. So it's good news? Or is that just whistling in the wind?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I certainly hope that they are prepared to do that, and there will be very, very strong pressure from the international community for them to come, unconditionally, into both treaties. And I think it's tremendously important they do so. Because as the President was saying, I mean, if we have nuclear proliferation in the world—India—then if Pakistan were again to defy what is a very, very strong plea to them from the rest of the world not to engage in this, then you've got the danger of other states as well. So I mean, we're dealing with extremely serious and threatening present dangers.

Situation in Indonesia

Mr. Frost. What about Indonesia, talking of serious and threatening dangers? I mean, there's not much that could be done, is there? I mean, you've all said you're not going to seek to get rid of Mr. Soeharto, although you probably wouldn't sob if he decided to step down of his own accord. But what is there that the rest of the world can do about a situation like that, or is it an example of where you can do nothing?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I don't think you can do nothing. We can't interfere in their own internal politics, it is true. But a lot of the discussions that we have had over this past couple of days have been about we bring about greater stability in the financial systems of the world, because the crisis in Asia that has rocked many of the economies there will have an impact right round the world, is already having, may have an even more serious impact in the future. So what we can do is try and devise the right architecture, if you like, for the financial systems of the world which lead to greater stability, more openness, more transparency, and where we keep the advantages of global markets and trade, but try and make sure that that happens within a system that's properly regulated.

President Clinton. Keep in mind, Indonesia is the fourth or fifth largest country in the world in population. So, even though what we've seen on the television is very troubling, this is a vast country, the largest Muslim country in the world, with a very complex society that has been through a very traumatic several months. And I think it's important to point out that the world community has not been idle. We've been working hard since November—at least since November to try to help Indonesia come out of its economic problems.

But we have felt all along that ultimately, to build a stable modern economy and to avoid this crisis, there would have to be some way for the Government and the President to deal with all elements of society on some sort of democratic basis. And that's what our statement says. So what we want is to see Indonesia come out of this whole and healthy. They should decide the fate of all their leaders; it should be up to the people to decide. But this is not a hopeless situation yet. This is a great country full of talented people with staggering economic achievements in the last 30 years—staggering.

So I think that what we have to do is to hope for the best and try to guard against the worst and keep working with them.

Asian Economies

Mr. Frost. And do you feel—you mentioned there as we led into that, the subject of the Asian situation. Mr. President, do you feel that the worst is over in the Asian economic crisis, that it's on the mend, or is still on the jaws of—

President Clinton. I think it's hard to generalize. I think the Philippines have done very well and a tribute to their leadership. Thailand is doing better. Korea is clearly coming back, which is very good, because it's a big part of the economy. And Malaysia is having a difficult time, but they have a lot of strong economic underpinnings. And Indonesia is the big question. The other thing, of course, is that Japan—Prime Minister Hashimoto is struggling mightily now to put together a package that will restore growth in Japan. If growth comes back to the Japanese economy, that will—because it so dwarfs the others in size, it will cure a lot of these problems.

Prime Minister Blair. I mean, the fundamentals are strong, actually, in the Asian economies, but we've just got to work together to put the right system around it so that both systems are helped.

Third World Debt Relief

Mr. Frost. Does all these other issues mean that you'll make less progress on the whole area of Third World debt at this G-8 than you both hoped, or can you catch up?

Prime Minister Blair. No. I think, in fact, we've had a very good meeting on Third World debt, and we've agreed on a number of specific measures, including greater help for countries, particularly if they're in a post-conflict situation or there's been conflict there, and for the highly indebted countries. Because for many of these countries—in Africa—the President has just been there recently and so knows better than most of us—but there is tremendous potential there. But they're struggling under this huge burden of debt. Often their political systems have been a tremendous handicap to them, but there is progress on the democratic front there. But we've got to give them the help that we can, whilst making sure that we're not just channeling aid, but we're actually making sure that

that money, when it goes in, is going to be used properly and where we're trying to alleviate the debt burden so that they can come out of this situation of crisis that they've been in.

President Clinton. I think to be fair, when Prime Minister Blair took over the head of the G-8, one of his initiatives was to have the right kind of debt relief. And we have embraced, now for a little more than a year, a strategy for the highly indebted poor countries that says we will—we know we should do debt relief, but it won't do any good unless they do things to help themselves. So we'll have a structured system where we'll give much, much more help to the highly indebted poor countries that actually undertake their own reform, so that we believe the debt relief will actually amount to money being invested in their future in a positive way.

And when I went to Africa, one of the things I saw was the countries with honest governments can channel the energy, the intelligence, the passion of a wonderful people and get a lot done. So I'm more optimistic about Africa than I was before I went there. But I do believe that we should help those who are trying to help themselves.

Prime Minister Blair. It's interesting. It's one of the great lessons of the 20th century that democracy and prosperity in the end go together.

The Euro and the Dollar

Mr. Frost. In terms of prosperity, one lightening question occurs to me. The euro—we're talking about the euro here—what will be the implications of a strong euro on the dollar, Mr. President? Could it be bad news for the dollar?

President Clinton. I don't think so. It could become, some time in the future, an alternative currency. You know, people might trade in the euro as well as the dollar. It could become—a lot of transactions might be done in the euro as well as the dollar. But I don't see that as a threatening thing. I think anything that brings free people closer together and increases prosperity in a democratic way, that makes it more likely to be broadly shared, is positive.

So I think as long as that's what's going on—you know, Europe—a unified Europe, it seems to me, is still committed to freedom, still committed to openness, still committed to a certain generosity of spirit, and I think that has to be good for the world. What we're trying to do,

slowly but surely, is to integrate political and economic and social systems of the world not in ways that diminish national sovereignty but that alleviate the problems of the world and enable us to tackle together those things we can't solve alone.

Advice for Prime Minister Blair

Mr. Frost. And you have a great working relationship, the two of you, but one difference between you, of course, is that Mr. President, you are in your second term and the Prime Minister is early in his first term. What is the most important advice to someone in their first time in order to get into their second term?

President Clinton. Oh, I think he's doing it. I think that—the most important thing I think he can do is to keep the commitments he made in the campaign and to stay in touch with the people and to not be deterred from doing the public's business. You know, people, when they hire you to do these jobs, they want you to work on their affairs. And then when you get in them, there's all sorts of static designed to break your concentration. You have to ignore it and stay at the business.

But I think my advice would be to—he had a very detailed theory about why he wanted to be Prime Minister and where he wanted Great Britain to go, and of course, I have a lot of sympathy with the ideas he put forward, and he's doing a good job of doing what he promised to do. And I think that's the most important thing. And then I think as—the more you get into it, then I think the more you begin to think about what's it going to be like when my children are my age; what's it going to be like when my grandchildren are here. And the more he serves, the more he'll have an impact on that as well.

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Mr. Frost. And along the way, one of the things you've both had to also conquer is to bring up your families under the glare of all that publicity when the children go to school and all of that. But that's fascinating.

Well, at the end of our time, let's return for a moment to where we began. Are you both confident, but not complacent as politicians always say, are you confident that the Northern Ireland people on Friday will take a decision which you believe passionately is the right decision, a positive decision, that they will feel the

hand of history on their shoulder? Are you confident about that?

Prime Minister Blair. I mean, I am confident, but I do know that they are considering this really with their heart and their head, and they're going into tremendous detail. And I think that over this next few days it's important that people put their concerns to people like myself and, perhaps, particularly to me and that I answer those concerns, so that people go in and vote yes, in a spirit of real optimism and confidence themselves about the future. And they can do that.

Mr. Frost. And do you have to have, or not—you don't have to have a majority of over 50 percent in each community in Northern Ireland, don't have to have that. Do you want that? Do you need it?

Prime Minister Blair. No, we don't have to have it, but I want as big a vote as possible in both communities. And I want this to be an agreement where we, for once and for all, we get rid of the zero-sum game in Northern Ireland politics which says if one side is happy with something, that means I'm unhappy. Both communities, both traditions, if you like, within Northern Ireland can be satisfied with this, because for the Unionists, the principle of consent is there; for the Nationalist community there is fairness and equity of treatment, the recognition of the Nationalist identity.

That's what this is—you know, I said this on Good Friday after that marathon negotiation we went through, that in the end it's not a fudge, this agreement; it is an historic settlement of Nationalist and Unionist aspirations. And what it means is that in a new world, 2 years off the millennium, where everything is changing around the Republic of Ireland, Europe, Britain, our relations with the rest of the world, where people can argue their case free in the knowledge that they can do so democratically rather than by resorting to violence—now, that's the historic settlement. And that's why I want as many people in both communities to come out and support it.

Mr. Frost. What are your thoughts, Mr. President? Are you confident? Can this be a win-win situation for both sides?

President Clinton. Oh, absolutely. There's no question in my view that, if they vote for the accord, it will turn out to be a win-win. I mean, think about where the world is going to be in 12 years. Just think about 12 years from

now—2010. You will have a much more globalized economy; you'll have both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland more involved in the European economy, more involved in the rest of the world, and more involved with each other, meeting at the tip of Northern Ireland, economically and psychologically, no matter what the legal framework is.

Now, the people that are at that vortex are going to have a very interesting, very rich, very good life if they vote to live it together. If they vote to stay apart, they're still going to be frustrated, distrustful, angry, and a little bit left out. And I think all of us, we have hope and fear inside. I say all the time, we all have little scales inside, and some days we wake up with hope weighing down, some days with fear weighing down. I think on election day the clearheadedness of the Irish people will prevail in Northern Ireland. I think that both communities will go in and vote for the future.

I just ask them to think about what the world will be like, what these islands will be like just 12 years from now, and what they want Northern Ireland to be. We know that democracies of diverse people are interesting places to be when your uniqueness is valued, but you understand that what you have in common as human beings is more important than what divides you. That's a fundamental thing we know. And I believe they'll accept that on election day.

Mr. Frost. Thank you so much. Because the other part of it is that when Mr. Willy Ross says, or is quoted as saying, "Look, if there's a no vote, then they'll all just get in and renegotiate it." That's not on, is it?

Prime Minister Blair. Well, no, I mean, look, I always say to people, of course, "We're here, and we'll try and pick up the pieces as best we can." But I mean it would be fundamentally wrong to say that to people. We would be in a situation, too, where it wouldn't be the status quo, where actually there is quite a lot of hope about, and people do feel they're making progress. We go backwards.

I mean the one thing I've learned in this whole process is if it doesn't go forward, it goes backwards. It never stays in the same place. So of course, we're the government, we pick up the pieces when everything goes wrong. But I think what the President has just said there, and has said as a visionist, what people can aspire to—

President Clinton. And the answer to that is, this agreement—I mean, I can see that even as an outsider—this agreement sets up a framework to embody in a thousand ways the principle of consent. If he doesn't like some detail, then the people will be perfectly free to modify it in the future within the framework of the agreement. So why take the risk that this moment won't present itself again for another generation, when anything that he believes is wrong with it, if he thinks he can persuade a majority he's right, can be modified by the people themselves in the future?

Mr. Frost. Thank you, both, very much, indeed. Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. President, thank you so much.

President Clinton. Thank you, David.

Prime Minister Blair. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 4:37 p.m. in the Weston Park estate for later broadcast on "Breakfast With Frost" on BBC1 television. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland; President Soeharto of Indonesia; and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto of Japan. Prime Minister Blair referred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Mr. Frost referred to Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble and Member of Parliament Willie Ross; and Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral of India. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom by John King of the Cable News Network in Weston-under-Lizard

May 16, 1998

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Mr. King. Let me start by thanking both of you for sharing some time on what is obviously a very busy day. We're in the closing days of the campaign for the peace initiative in Northern Ireland, and suddenly there seems to be apprehension, a lot of opposition. You see some slippage in the public opinion polls, the critics saying that you see these people, terrorists, criminals, at rallies being hailed as heroes.

Each of you, if you could share your thoughts on what you think of the tone of the campaign, and do you share that apprehension? And how do you counter the message of those who say, vote no?

Prime Minister Blair. I think before we get a vote as important as this, there is bound to be a lot of apprehension, consideration by people, and it's right that they treat this seriously, because it affects their future. And one of the fascinating things is there has been very little debate in this referendum campaign about the institutional structure, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the relationship with the Republic of Ireland, because the thing has wrecked every attempt to have a peace agreement in Northern Ireland for the past 50, 60 years. Instead, people are worried, as you say, about things like prisoners.

But as I say to people, when you look at the facts, these guys who were out on the platform the other day under day-release schemes, they were done years ago. The vast majority of prisoners will be out within a few years anyway. And in the end, people have got to look at the package as a whole and say, "What is the best for the future: to have stability and prosperity and the chance to bring up your children with some prospect of staying in Northern Ireland and doing well, or to slip back into the ways that Northern Ireland knew for decade upon decade of division and bitterness and hatred?"

President Clinton. I think some of the reservation has come from people who wonder: Well, is there some sort of trick here; can somebody have it both ways; can they be part of the political life of the country; and can they sort of condone violence? And I can tell you, at least from America's point of view, the answer to that is no. Anybody who resorts to violence will have no friends in the United States. I don't care what side they're on or what their heritage is or what their previous ties are.

And I think I can speak for the overwhelming majority of Irish-Americans in both the Catholic and Protestant communities, that all we have