

Interviewer

The Government's been careful to keep Conservative backbenchers on board throughout the peace process, but the Chairman of the Tory Backbench Northern Ireland Committee, Andrew Hunter, says he's very concerned at the announcement of Ministerial talks. He had two meetings yesterday with the Secretary of State and has asked for another. Mr Hunter joins me on the line.

Have you made up your mind yet whether this is a good thing or a bad thing?

Andrew Hunter

Well, I think you slightly misrepresented the opening words. I had telephone conversations with the Secretary of State yesterday, not meetings, and what I have been saying is that if it is indeed the case that Sinn Fein has shifted its ground and does accept the Government's conditions for Ministerial involvement in talks well it is excellent news and a significant phase in the peace process. But nevertheless, both other MPs and the media have been asking the question what is the evidence of Sinn Fein's change, and I think we are entitled to ask that question and seek an answer to it.

Interviewer

It's a question of who blinks first I suppose in what has been a standoff for several weeks, but Mitchell McLaughlin, you heard him there, I believe, was saying that this is a victory for the peace process. That's very conciliatory talk?

Andrew Hunter

Well, it is indeed a victory for the peace process if Sinn Fein/IRA has changed its ground, accepts the priority of the decommissioning of illegally held weapons, and yes, that's very good news indeed.

Interviewer

The great fear voiced by Sinn Fein is that there will be two-track or two-level talks. Do you think that the Government would be wise to pursue such a policy to keep Sinn Fein somehow at arm's length for some time in the future?

Andrew Hunter

Well, whatever happens in the exploratory dialogue is entirely dependent upon Sinn Fein. The Government has made quite clear for some time that there are these two phases, not twin-tracks, two phases. First, exploratory dialogue, and if exploratory dialogue advances satisfactorily, then the fourth is the substantive talks, but for Sinn Fein to take part in those there has to be that commitment in principle to decommissioning, practicalities of decommissioning have to be agreed and a significant start to that process has to take place.

Interviewer

Many Unionists of course see this as yet another concession to republicanism as they see the concession over the statement of the paramilitaries' ceasefire, now we have a working assumption that arms might be decommissioned some time in the future. Is that a correct analysis?

Andrew Hunter

I understand very much indeed those are Unionist fears and they are not restricted to Ulster Unionists. We are certainly not in the business for appeasing the IRA, we do not intend to surrender one bit, we do not want that. If we can get an accommodated agreement where the two traditions of Northern Ireland can come to an understanding well that's the objective and that is what we want. But there's no question of surrender to the IRA, no question of appeasing the IRA.

Interviewer

Despite this standoff for the months it has lasted, most people in Northern Ireland certainly have said it's going to happen some time,

we must just await that happening. It's also seen as inevitable that at one stage that John Major will perhaps be shaking hands with Gerry Adams. How would the backbenchers view that?

Andrew Hunter

If the process works as we hope, then indeed that may happen one day, but we're still a very long way from it. What we have is exploratory dialogue, started in December between Government officials and Sinn Fein. The Government now believes that Sinn Fein has changed its attitude to those exploratory talks and Ministers will take part, but we're a long, long way from even the beginning of the substantive talks involving Sinn Fein.

Interviewer

And you still want to see the evidence of this change of policy of Sinn Fein?

Andrew Hunter

Well, that's right. Listening to the words of Sinn Fein spokesmen isn't a very pleasant experience, but certainly doesn't give grounds for very much confidence.

Interviewer

More now on this morning's main story that the Government is to meet with Sinn Fein. How do Ulster Unionists view the prospect of Michael Ancram sitting across the table from Martin McGuinness? I'm joined on the line from London now by the East Londonderry MP William Ross. How do you view this prospect?

William Ross

I think the question that's in everybody's mind this morning in Northern Ireland, is who has changed the ground? Has the Government surrendered once more or has the IRA actually shifted their stance? And on past performance I think we will find that the IRA have not shifted very much, if at all.

Interviewer

So you think it's the Government who has backed down here and taken a different tack, shall we say?

William Ross

Oh yes, what's exactly happened I think is that they have been dancing around each other, a sort of a long distance waltz, getting steadily closer for some weeks and they now have finally come up with a form of words which satisfies them, which will allow them to talk, or rather which will allow the Government to talk to Sinn Fein and I don't think that there has been any real change in the stance of Sinn Fein or indeed of the IRA since the beginning of September.

Interviewer

You don't sound very surprised by this, Mr Ross. Indeed that would be the case of many people, there was an inevitability, wasn't there?

William Ross

For Heaven's sake, Wendy, how could anybody be surprised at this ... of the Government's behaviour. Since September we have seen a steady

retreat in the face of an IRA intransigence and there has been absolutely no change so far as I can see in what the IRA and Sinn Fein have been saying in that period of time. They have stuck fairly firmly to their guns (sorry about the pun) but the Government seems to have steadily retreated, and they now say that they're going to talk about decommissioning of weapons but the IRA/Sinn Fein say "oh no, we're talking about everything, everything's on the table", and we know what's on the table.....

Interviewer

It does include decommissioning of weapons. Mitchell McLaughlin admitted that this morning that arms did have to be discussed and it does - I don't need to underline again - we've now had eight months in which we've had this peaceful situation and in which surely the only option now is dialogue. It must be better than any other option from the table, shall we say?

William Ross

Well, I think if we were going to get to the stage where there was going to be dialogue without any shift in Sinn Fein's position, then there's no good reason why we shouldn't have got into it at the second week in September. But the Government said there had to be a change in their attitude, there had to be decommissioning of weapons, there had to be a surrender of weapons and now we see that they're just getting round to talking about a possibility of decommissioning or surrender of weapons at some stage, but of course we're also told there's only a preliminary agenda that this is only talks about talks second stage as it were. So we've quite a long way to go yet.

Interviewer

So Ken Maginnis was right yesterday when he said basically that it was no big deal?

William Ross

I think Ken's absolutely right; indeed I believe if you look at what Ken has said on this issue from the very beginning, you'll find he's been pretty close to the mark as matters have developed. You seen that his forecast, the forecasts of the party generally have been correct.

Interviewer

If the Government's going to have the chance now to put its point of view to Sinn Fein, is there in any way a hankering on your part to get at them yourselves, if you like, to get to the point where you can look them straight in the eye and say: "Look here, this is what we think"?

William Ross

Don't be ridiculous Wendy. The IRA and Sinn Fein know perfectly well what the Government's point of view is, and the Government knows perfectly well what Sinn Fein's point of view is, and we know perfectly well what Sinn Fein's point of view is. They're only interested in victory; they're only interested in a united Ireland by whatever means and they're going at it as hard as they possibly can. But what surprises me is that the Government does not as yet seem to have the fact that the bomb in Oklahoma last week had made life a lot more difficult for Sinn Fein's propaganda across the water, in America, and there seems to be no cognisance taken of that or no action taken, based upon it.