

Standing on the outside, Sinn Fein looks in at the talks with scepticism on the one hand, and some apprehension on the other. Mark Brennock, Northern Editor, reports.

Sinn Fein claims real problem is being ignored

"There is no partitionist solution," Sinn Fein's president, Mr Gerry Adams, told *The Irish Times* this week. There were major difficulties for those trying to reach agreement in the forthcoming talks. And even if they did "the most they'll do is cobble together an arrangement, hype it, then move the focus away (from Northern Ireland)."

That sums up the different Sinn Fein attitudes. First, the talks can't work in the long term because their agenda is too narrow; the talks are about seeking a solution without addressing the problem — partition.

Second, it is going to be difficult, even within those narrow confines, for the parties involved to reach agreement. "Will Hume accept responsibility for the UDR; will Paisley accept disbandment of the UDR?" Mr Adams asks, pointing to just one area of major disagreement.

Third, they could put together an agreement, however limited. They would "hype it", it would attract much positive publicity and public goodwill. It would move the focus away from Northern Ireland, and, by extension, from Sinn Fein and the IRA.

In the first two points, there is an element of assurance that Sinn Fein's logic is right, and that the parties to the talks are probably wasting their time. The third point, however, is causing concern within Sinn Fein. What if the parties agree on something?

It would be the worst scenario for Sinn Fein and the IRA. What would be the implications for Sinn Fein? "They might be successful in defeating Sinn Fein and the IRA for years," Mr Adams said. Just as Sinn Fein and the IRA weren't seen as forces to be reckoned with from the foundation of the State until 1969, the same could conceivably happen again.

But he doesn't want *The Irish Times* to go off writing the headline "Adams concedes danger to Sinn Fein," he said. "I'm saying that even if their best case happens, the most they'll do is put the lid on it". The "root cause" wouldn't go away. It would only fade from attention. If a new "partitionist agreement" lasted, it could fade away for a considerable period, but not forever.

The root cause, according to Sinn Fein, is the British presence and the unionist veto over a united Ireland. A partitionist arrangement would "put the lid" on the symptoms of the problem, such as discrimination, but at some stage, these would re-emerge.



Mr Gerry Adams

Sinn Fein doesn't concede that there have been major advances in tackling these symptoms under direct rule, or that there could be further advances in that direction under, say, a power-sharing

Adams admits talks could be setback

From Mark Brennock

AN AGREEMENT in the forthcoming talks about a possible new British/Irish agreement could set Sinn Fein and the IRA back for years, but would still not bring a just solution to Northern Ireland, the Sinn Fein President, Mr Gerry Adams, has said.

In an interview with *The Irish Times*, Mr Adams said that even if the talks realised their most optimistic ambitions, "the most they'll do is put the lid on it (Northern Ireland)". The most those involved could do, he maintained, was to "cobble together an arrangement", and then hype it up with the aim of moving the focus of attention away from Northern Ireland.

"That might be successful in defeating Sinn Fein and the IRA for years," he said, in the same way as had happened between the foundation of the State and 1969. That was the most pessimistic scenario for Sinn Fein, he said, but he had serious doubts that it would come about.

He questioned whether the parties would be able to agree on

arrangement. All that would happen, says a spokesman, is that these issues would be "fudged".

Since Mr Brooke started his "talks about talks" process in January last year, Sinn Fein has been saying that it can't work. Mr Brooke has set a British agenda, so it couldn't work. The talks were aimed at finding a partitionist solution, and there is no partitionist solution.

The British political, military and administrative presence must be removed from Northern Ireland, and the Irish people given their inalienable right to national self-determination. Only then can we have a just and lasting peace, says Sinn Fein.

Sinn Fein is unable to put its view to the other parties at the talks because, according to Mr Brooke, it has excluded itself by its support of violence for political ends. This issue of Sinn Fein's support for violence and its exclusion from the democratic process has been the subject of public statements from Mr Brooke aimed at Sinn Fein, and from Sinn Fein aimed at Mr Brooke, for the past 15 months.

Mr Brooke has set conditions

for Sinn Fein's involvement in the political process, while Sinn Fein has set conditions for it to cease supporting violence. But neither side is putting forward proposals for compromise: they are simply calling on the other side to surrender completely.

Sinn Fein, on the one hand, says it will stop supporting violence when the British announce their intention to withdraw from the North — in other words, when they capitulate. Mr Brooke says Sinn Fein will be welcome in the political process when it stops supporting the IRA.

While conceding that it is not impossible for some limited agreement to be reached at the forthcoming talks, Mr Adams resents the amount of "hype" being generated by the whole process.

"Every 2½ years, the incumbent British Minister has some sort of initiative, and I have formed the impression that they are almost in a no-lose situation. With an initiative, at the least they get a deflection of criticism out of it. At the most they get some arrangement out of it."

The British Government felt under pressure to be seen to "do something" about the North, and once Mr Brooke had begun his efforts to get people to talk, he couldn't come back, says Adams, and say "they won't talk". That would have confirmed the Sinn Fein view that the agenda is too narrow, he says, so he got the parties to acquiesce in, rather than agree to, talks.

But despite the cynicism, what if Mr Brooke gets a deal without Sinn Fein involvement? "We are still here," says Adams. "They have to hold an election. If he does bring about some sort of partitionist arrangement, he will have to hold an election and Sinn Fein will be there."

"We are the second largest party in Belfast, the largest in Fermanagh-South Tyrone," he said. But the Anglo-Irish Agreement effectively halted the process whereby Sinn Fein was eroding SDLP support and getting close to a position where it could challenge for the position of majority nationalist party.

The party is undoubtedly worried that a popular pragmatic deal arising from the talks could have a similar effect on Sinn Fein's position compared with that of the SDLP. The accusation that one of the main purposes of the talks is to isolate Sinn Fein is prompted partly by a fear that a successful outcome could do just that.

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