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COMMENTS BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE, RT HON PETER BROOKE, MP
DURING A "DOORSTEP" BY THE MEDIA AT DUNGANNON: 22 JANUARY 1991

Interviewer:

What do you think of the talks. Where do they stand?

Mr Brooke:

We have entered the second year: in every horse race you have to go round the course more than once, or most horse races you do, and we're into the second year. I will repeat that the attitude which people have shown towards me and towards the talks has continued to be constructive, and people have had plenty of opportunity of stopping the process if they had wished to do so, and the fact that the talks which I had with the SDLP last Thursday were conducted in as cordial an atmosphere as they were, was encouraging.

Interviewer:

Are you though any closer to resolving the time at which the Irish Government will enter the talks?

Mr Brooke:

I think necessarily we have to be, because in a situation where the things that divide us are now relatively narrow, you couldn't but be making progress if the talks continue in the way that they are. Given the fact that it is so narrow and therefore the opportunity for putting down the shutters and calling it a day, as ready as they are, the fact that people aren't suggests that they do actually wish us to get across the final gap.

Interviewer:

Does this mean that it's now down to putting the final package to Dublin at your next meeting before the talks start?

Mr Brooke:

On all these occasions you've got to make sure that everybody is happy with what you want to do, and it's perfectly understandable when you see each of the Parties - using Parties in its widest sense - that

there are things that they wish to discuss at points at the level of detail, but yes, I think if we're going to move into the next phase then we would expect to do it in the reasonably near future.

Interviewer:

Could I just ask you, Sir, is it now agreed that you should be the arbiter regarding at what point Dublin becomes involved?

Mr Brooke:

I don't know that I would say it was agreed, but certainly the fact that that is a role which I might play is one which has been fairly widely ventilated and nobody seems to have objected to it.

Interviewer:

Have you found a formula which is satisfactory to both the SDLP and the Unionists since you both saw them last?

Mr Brooke:

All I can say is I think we are making progress. I shan't believe that we have actually done it until we've reached a point where everybody can agree to our going forward and it won't work unless everybody does agree, but in my view, in terms of both the Unionists and the SDLP, we have made further progress towards that point.

Interviewer:

And that's more progress than you made throughout all of last year, is it?

Mr Brooke:

It's more progress than we made on this particular issue. We made a fair amount of progress during the period between January and July when we were operating largely in private. When this one issue became a rather public issue after July then perhaps it was exposed to rather more searchlight and limelight, and we didn't perhaps make as much progress in the second half of last year.

Interviewer:

But you say you made progress. Are you reaching a point, do you think, where you can at last say "yes" we can start talking?

Mr Brooke:

Unless I am being misled by the reactions of people, yes, I think we are moving towards that point.

Interviewer:

Is that to say, Sir, that you are away past the posts of possible, rather than probable, in terms of talks?

Mr Brooke:

No, I think I said it on previous occasions, I said that I think it much better to continue to be cautious and I will continue to be so.

Interviewer:

What's your reaction to the latest IRA murder, particularly against the background of some speculation and some reports that the IRA may be considering a ceasefire some way along the line?

Mr Brooke:

I thought that it was a very tragic event, particularly as it was inflicted on a person who, although he had seen service in the RUC Reserve in the past, had left the security forces some time in the past, and I thought in that sense it was a totally dastardly event. I have no comments to make about the possibility of a ceasefire beyond those which I made at Christmas when the IRA declared their brief ceasefire then.

Interviewer:

Would you appeal to them to call a halt?

Mr Brooke:

I think that in 1991 in terms of the (perhaps an ironic thing to say in the context of what's happening in the Gulf) but in terms of the

rest of the world we have seemed to have made progress during 1990 in the resolution of a number of age-old disputes and I would hope that there was a possibility of doing so in 1991.

Interviewer:

Do you think that there are people within the IRA, within Sinn Féin who are listening to what you have to say and what you have been saying in your recent speeches?

Interviewer:

Mr Brooke:

Any observation on my part would be conjecture in that regard.

Mr Brooke:

Interviewer:

If I could just put it to you - you've been sending signals to them it appears in public and they have been sending signals to you in public as well. Is there not a danger that all those signals become demeaned when you keep publicly stating them. Is there an argument for doing something more privately?

Mr Brooke:

I am not sure that I would agree with the premise of your question. Even if that were correct I don't think it becomes demeaned by this process. In terms of any private contact the Government has made perfectly clear throughout that as long as violence continues they have nothing directly to say.

Interviewer:

Can I go back to the talks. When you say Secretary of State that you might be reaching a point where talks could start, does that mean you could go to Mr Collins when you next meet him and say: I have reached an agreement between or with the SDLP and the Unionists about how far we can go. Can you put that formula to him in order that talks could start? Is that the next step?

Mr Brooke:

Because there are a number of different Parties - again used in its widest sense - taking part in this process the final stages of making sure that everybody is content does involve a fair number of small

delicate details, but if we were to reach agreement between the SDLP and the Unionists, though I have never regarded the SDLP as being identical with the Irish Government, but if the SDLP and the Unionists were proxy for the Irish Government, but if the SDLP and the Unionists were to be happy then I think that that would put a particular pressure on the Irish Government and the British Government to bring the matter to a conclusion.

Interviewer:

Are you saying to us that they are happy?

Mr Brooke:

I'm saying that, in terms of the outstanding issue, I think we have made significant progress towards a resolution of that outstanding point.

Interviewer:

Secretary of State, last night's victim was the sixth former member of the security forces to be killed in the last twelve months. Is there anything more which can be done to protect such people from these attacks?

Mr Brooke:

Last night's victim was not a current member of the security forces, and I fear that more than six members of the security forces have in fact been killed during the past twelve months. There is no way in a society such as ours where everybody can be protected. What one has to do is to do the maximum that can be done and that still leaves us numb with the tragedy that we have seen in the course of the last 24 hours.

Interviewer:

Is there any evidence that his attackers came across the border?

Mr Brooke:

I have no knowledge.

Interviewer: Secretary of State, just one point, if there was a prolonged ceasefire, could there be a place at the conference table for Sinn Fein?

Mr Brooke: The position which I have consistently taken on behalf of the Government is that we are talking about a renunciation of violence. We are not talking about just a ceasefire per se.

Interviewer:

Are you though any closer to resolving the time at which the Irish Government will enter the talks?

Mr Brooke:

I think necessarily we have to be, because in a situation where the things that divide us are now relatively narrow, you couldn't but be making progress if the talks continue in the way that they are. Given the fact that it is so narrow and therefore the opportunity for putting down the shutters and calling it a day, as ready as they are, the fact that people aren't suggesting that they do actually wish us to get across the final gap.

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