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Reference Code:	2017/4/37
Creation Dates:	30 April 1987
Extent and medium:	10 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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Conf 5A/204
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Radio Ulster's "Talk Back" programme - Interview
with Mr. Peter Robinson - 30 April 1987

Talk Back turns today to the Deputy Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Peter Robinson, who is one of the central figures in the joint unionist task force. The task force was set up to monitor political opinion in the unionist community and to consider ways of breaking the political stalemate. It is now likely that it will produce an alternative to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and send up signals to the British Government and the SDLP that the unionist parties will negotiate if certain guarantees are granted. Later today the task force will complete its talks with unionist groupings and its report will be sent to the Party leaders next month. So when Peter Robinson came into the studio earlier today I began by asking him how much progress had been made.

Mr. Robinson: Well I think that, as would be expected, there hasn't been an overall consensus. There have been wide areas of agreement with all of those that we have spoken to and there has been a clear majority view coming from the many stands of the pro-union community that we have had the opportunity to meet. We met a very wide range of the unionist community, in fact I don't think it could have been much wider. We have had the opportunity to speak to churchmen, to industrialists, to the loyal orders, to loyalist organisations and representing as they do the political parties, I think that probably covers the whole gambit of unionist opinion. I think that there is the view that we should be making the running more than we are at the present time

Interviewer: The political running?

Mr. Robinson: Well, both the political running because I don't think that you can produce any effective political change from a position that is seen to be anything less than strong, so by opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement we must put ourselves in a stronger position to negotiate, and those negotiations can

only take place when the necessary circumstances and conditions are met. And I think that can only come about when unionists have within their own organisation and for themselves decided where it is that they are going and what alternative they want to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Interviewer: So in a sense have the pressures upon you from the unionist community changed slightly, in other words, changed from proccuro on you to have the Agreement smashed to the current pressure which would appear certainly to be "for God sake get some alternative that might be acceptable to the Dublin and London Governments"?

Mr. Robinson: Well, I think we have entered a new phase in many ways and it is not so much that pressures and circumstances that people envisage the Agreement may have changed, I think what has occurred is that for the first year I think it was right that the community organised its opposition in such a way as to show that we weren't going to consent to the Agreement and that we weren't going to acquiesce on it. Effectively I think they have done that and I think more effectively than the Government imagined that they would. I think the Government believed that the community would have settled down and accepted the Agreement after about three months of hopping and popping. That hasn't occurred and I think the Government must now recognise that the Agreement can't stick and that an alternative is necessary to their view. That therefore brings us into a new phase. The Government will attempt to work the Agreement which is starting through the Public Order legislation and such like. Our opposition therefore, on the one hand, must be to ensure that they are challenged in any implementation of the Agreement and we must give them the opportunity to get off the hook that they have got themselves on by saying that we are willing to consider an alternative to and replacement for the Agreement. Those are the words that Jim Molyneaux and Ian Paisley used from the very start. I think that the emphasis that was given to our campaign was always a negative one, that Ulster was saying no and only no, but from the very beginning indeed before the

Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, the two unionist leaders had said that they were prepared to negotiate an alternative. And what we are really saying, I suspect and I think the community is saying it too, is that more emphasis should be given to that particular strand of the two unionists leaders view.

Interviewer: You talked about the hook that Mrs. Thatcher is on but surely you too, the unionist political families is on a hook as well, a hook of your own making in that you have said there can be no movement, there can be no talks until Mrs. Thatcher takes the initiative and suspends the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Now she is not going to do that unless you reveal your own hand surely?

Mr. Robinson: Well, I think Mrs. Thatcher put herself on a hook. We didn't put ourselves on that hook because effectively when the Prime Minister refused to consult unionists before the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed she had put them out of the process and unionists would then be negotiating if they were to negotiate in the present circumstances with the Anglo-Irish Agreement in place and they would therefore be negotiating for some structure within the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That isn't acceptable. What we are saying is that we would be prepared, providing the conditions for negotiations are right and providing the agenda is right, we are prepared to negotiate an alternative, a substitute for the Agreement rather than a modification of it. And in those circumstances I think you will find a willing and generous unionist leadership.

Interviewer: But if the task force comes up with a report which is in essence a blueprint for the alternative you will be proposing for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, isn't that revealing your hand before negotiations begin?

Mr. Robinson: No, I don't think that we can come up with any detailed structure, at least certainly publicly there could be no release of a detailed alternative. I think the most that publicly can be done is for the two unionist leaders, if they

accept the general principle and I suspect that they probably will because its in essence what they have been saying from the date in August before the Agreement was signed, that we would give a signal that in the right set of circumstances and conditions that unionists would be prepared to move in a certain direction.

Interviewer: Who do you hope to decode those signals? Is it the British Government, is it the Irish Government, is it the SDLP?

Mr. Robinson: Oh, I suppose that you put up a signal and whoever is interested in deciphering starts to do it and maybe in many ways our job is to convince reasonable opinion, whatever category it falls into, maybe even in the press to show that unionists have not been negative, that they have always had proposals on the table. I mean its an outrage to me the suggestion that unionists are always saying no. Over, and I'm just taking over the last couple of years, the Ulster unionist party put out their document "the way forward". My party put out two documents the one "Ulster the future assured" and then another on legislative devolution, our two parties along with the Alliance party put forward as a basis for negotiation, the proposals that were worked under Sir Frederick Caterwood. Since then the two unionist party leaders wrote in August 1985 to the Prime Minister giving a framework not only for a structure within Northern Ireland but for the relationship that there would be with the Republic of Ireland should that structure be set up. And again our two party executives, even after the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, passed resolutions which indicated the broad nature and framework of any further negotiations. So we haven't been negative but the emphasis given to our campaign has simply been "no" to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But we have been saying yes to a lot of things and maybe its up to us to make a more clarion call of our position on what our alternative might be at least in the framework and skeletal form.

Interviewer: Obviously that alternative is going to be one that has to be acceptable to the SDLP. It has to be acceptable to the British Government and it has to be acceptable to the Irish Government. And if I interpret you correctly, you are prepared to move in some measure towards finding that kind of acceptability, finding that kind of consensus. Isn't the corollary to that that you ought now to start considering having talks without prejudice and without precondition with, for example, the SDLP and primarily with Mrs. Thatcher?

Mr. Robinson: Well there is another clear necessity, they have to be acceptable to the unionist community, a community that has lived for years under terrorism, that had an Agreement imposed upon them without consultation that doesn't have their consent and yet to a large section of the world they, regardless of all those impositions and the agony that their community have gone through, are seen to be the baddies. Therefore I think that in many ways that unionist community must be satisfied that this safeguards their position within the United Kingdom and can give them a peaceful existence in this part of the United Kingdom, so I put that as my first priority, the views of the unionist community and I think the two leaders did, and that was the reason that they set up the task force to take unionist opinion on the matter. Having moved from that position then you try with a reasonable alternative to secure as much agreement for it as possible. But you cannot without prejudice, because I mean that is a euphemism but it doesn't really mean anything. If the Anglo-Irish Agreement is there then your talks are prejudiced, they are prejudiced because the SDLP that you would be talking to in those circumstances has an absolute veto, they sit and they will listen to whatever you say and they'll say, well you know, we've got the Anglo-Irish Agreement, we don't need to move until you do exactly what we want you to do. And that gives them the upper hand in any negotiations and therefore if you want real negotiations without prejudice the Anglo-Irish Agreement does need to be suspended as the two leaders have requested.

Interviewer: So where then do you look for movement. I mean once you have your report and once you have your alternative and once you have sent up your smoke signals that indicate you are prepared to negotiate an alternative, who has got to be the first party in all of those to move, I mean has it got to be the British Government?

Mr. Robinson: Well, I think the British Government are a key element. The British Government after all by-passed the unionist community and they are the party that can bring the unionists back into the political process. They have refused to listen to the voice of the unionist community and therefore they are the ones that will have to give the unionists the opportunity to speak again. And I would have thought that the Prime Minister would have a clear choice, she would have the choice of clutching to an Agreement that has been shown over the period of the last number of months to increase violence, it has increased the instability both in economic and political terms in Northern Ireland and it has caused greater division in this community. So every day that would pass with the unionists giving a clear signal that they had a reasonable alternative to it would be a day in which the Prime Minister would have the finger pointed at her for every act of violence that occurred, for every aspect of economic decline, for every indicator of political instability, and for every attitude of division in our community. For she will be the one who was refusing to have an Agreement that could bring real peace, stability and reconciliation.

Interviewer: You talked there about sending up your own smoke signals after the task force completes its report. Do you detect, as I think some people do, I think I do, that there are smoke signals coming up from the SDLP that they are prepared to discuss, that they are prepared perhaps to move for what you perceive of as their rigid position with an entire veto over any movement?

Mr. Robinson: Well, sometimes it is difficult to decipher these codes, and there have been noises made and I think there is scepticism within the unionist community, and it is the mistrust that comes with the lack of contact, a lack of contact that is a result of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that perhaps we don't talk the same language and maybe what is being said one side isn't properly being interpreted by the other. I think there is a general view within the unionist community that the noises that are being made by the SDLP are more noises to suck us in to the Anglo-Irish process and to have us negotiate a structure of Government within the Anglo-Irish Agreement and under the auspices of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Interviewer: If there is a communication problem, if there is a problem of a lack of understanding, a lack of ability to decode those signals isn't that a strong case for the unionists having talks formally or informally with the SDLP so that both sides know exactly where the other side stands?

Mr. Robinson: I think yes, it is a good case for those talks, but those talks can only take place under the right circumstances. Unionists aren't going to go into talks with their hands tied behind their backs.

Interviewer: No, I'm not saying negotiations now, I'm simply saying talks, discussions, this is where we're at where are you at? That kind of discussion surely cannot do any harm and cannot prejudice your position in future negotiations?

Mr. Robinson: Well, I suspect that those talks to be meaningful need to be in the form of negotiations with the SDLP and that can only take place with the suspension of the Agreement. Now, I can understand the SDLP from their position, thought it will not be accepted in the unionist community, saying look maybe the Agreement isn't bringing us very much but at least it has put the Official unionists and the Democratic unionists in the

halfpenny place. They are in a difficult situation and the embarrassment it has caused to them is sufficient cause for us to smile and the advantage that we have over the unionist community, where we can whisper in the ear of an Irish or English Minister and the effect change by that is more power than all the unionist MPs put together. In effect we have a situation where there is minority control in Northern Ireland and the majority have no effective voice in this country. The Anglo-Irish Agreement gives them and discriminates against the unionist community in that they have a partner, a surrogate, if you like, in the shape of the Dublin Government who in the Intergovernmental Conference negotiates for them. There is no one doing that for the unionist community because no one will tell me that Nick Scott or Tom King represents the unionist community in Northern Ireland. They have nothing in common with the unionists of Northern Ireland and therefore quite clearly they are in a position of clear advantage. Now, in that position of clear advantage I can see a reluctance on their part, its bound to be a reluctance on their part, to move to anything that is less than what they have, why should they.

Interviewer: You say why should they, but surely they are pragmatic politicians in themselves if they can see something that is better and that after all is what you are hoping to produce as a result of the task force, because you cannot offer them anything worse than their current position, what you can offer them is an alternative?

Mr. Robinson: Yes, but then you come back to the dilemma that we referred to earlier, namely, that you cannot give your hand away before negotiations start and negotiations can't start until there is a suspension of the Agreement. So unionists are not going to give all before negotiations start and then have somebody screw them for some more after that. Its very clear to us that the only way forward is for the Prime Minister to find some mechanism to suspend that Agreement and to stop the working of the Maryfield Secretariat.

Interviewer: And if that Agreement were to be suspended, and that's a very very broad if, would you then be prepared to enter into meaningful negotiations with the SDLP to determine the way forward, because after all both Mrs. Thatcher has said that the Agreement can only come from the parties within Northern Ireland, that certainly was the mind set of Garrett FitzGerald, it may not be that of Charles Haughey, and it certainly would seem to be from the straws and the wind the will of the people of Northern Ireland as a whole?

Mr. Robinson: Well, whether we in those circumstances are negotiating directly with the SDLP or whether we are negotiating with the British Government, I think there has been a clear indication from the two unionist party leaders that they are prepared to negotiate an alternative to the Agreement. We would be fools if we weren't prepared to get rid of an agreement that is causing death and destruction in our province. And therefore in a spirit of generosity I believe that you would find that there was sufficient latitude for the two unionist party leaders to negotiate a reasonable alternative to and replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement. One that would provide the essential ingredients that would bring peace and stability and reconciliation, namely, the consent of the largest section of this community, the unionist people.

Interviewer: And what about the Irish dimension?

Mr. Robinson: Well, the Irish dimension was indicated in the letter of, I think it was the 28th August, to the Prime Minister from Jim Molyneux and Ian Paisley where they recognised that if there was a structural Government in Northern Ireland, that there would have to be a relationship between the leaders of that structure and the leaders of the Irish Republic. The nature and character of that relationship is obviously something open to negotiation, but it will be an unreasonable politician in Northern Ireland who, if he felt there was advantage to his

people by having some contact with his opposite number in the Irish Republic, would refuse to talk to him.

Interviewer: Could I ask you one final point and again its a very subjective one, and we're talking about codes and we're talking about smoke signals, do you as a politician of relatively long standing in Northern Ireland, do you detect or feel in any way that movement has begun, that things are starting to move forward, because they have to perforce?

Mr. Robinson: I think that there is a willingness in the unionist community to move towards an alternative to the Agreement and I think that you are probably seeing it now for one clear reason, because I believe that more and more and particularly on the mainland that there is a recognition that the Anglo-Irish Agreement isn't working, isn't going to work, and therefore we need to get an alternative to it. I think its a recognition on the part of opinion formers, if you like, that we need an alternative that has encouraged the unionists to take the step that they are now considering to take.