

SIMON COVENY, TD IRISH DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

ANDREW MARR SHOW, 3RD DECEMBER, 2017

SIMON COVENY TD

Irish Deputy Prime Minister

AM: Might the Irish border problem derail the Brexit process? Let's ask the Tanaiste, Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Simon Coveny. He joins me now from Cork. Welcome Mr Coveny. Can I ask you first of all Donald Tusk has given you in effect a veto over these Brexit talks. Will you use it or are you prepared to use it, I should say?

SC: Well we certainly don't want to be vetoing anything. I mean the Irish government, just like the British government, wants to be able to move the Brexit process onto Phase 2 and we want to be able to provide the kind of certainty that many businesses are calling for in Britain and Ireland and indeed in other parts of the European Union. So there is no desire I can tell you in Ireland to delay this process. But at the same time we have a responsibility as a government to represent the interests on the island of Ireland, North and South, and let's not forget that next year will be the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement which is the basis for the peace process and relations between Britain and Ireland on the island of Ireland and we believe that as an island, Ireland is uniquely vulnerable and exposed to a potential bad outcome from Brexit. And that is why we are looking for more progress than we have in terms of understanding how the border issues in particular on the island of Ireland and the North South cooperation that has created a normality on the island of Ireland which is a hugely positive thing. Instead of the border actually dividing people, like it has in the past, the border actually brings people together now. You know, farmers trade across it, goods and services and people move freely on the island of Ireland, so this isn't -

SIMON COVENY, TD IRISH DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

AM: Can I just jump in, sorry. What a lot of people in the North now believe is that having an open border and therefore Northern Ireland having to be much closer to the single market and to the customs union and creating in effect an all-Ireland economy, with a watery border between that and the rest of the UK, is the first stage to a United Ireland and that you have a political agenda here. You want to achieve Irish unity by economics. And that's really what this is all about.

SC: Well that's simply not true and some of your previous speakers' description of what's happening in Ireland politically also isn't true. We're not at risk of a General Election right now. We did have a difficult political week. The former Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland did resign, but Sinn Fein is not growing in strength. In fact in the last opinion poll they're weaker than they've been for quite some time. So there is no Sinn Fein influence on the government here in terms of what we're trying to do. This is simply the Irish government sticking to a consistent position that we have had for months and perhaps the only thing that has changed is the understanding that others have that Ireland is very determined to actually hold its position because we feel we have an obligation to ensure that the border issues are a significant factor in terms of the considerations around Brexit right now. We cannot allow as –

AM; Can I jump on, sorry.

SC: - some kind of collateral damage or unintended consequence of Brexit to have the recreation of a border on the island of Ireland. So I have been careful to try and avoid a green versus orange debate in the context of Northern Ireland here and instead we're trying to protect the status quo if you like through Brexit. Which is an important status quo on the island of Ireland that keeps people peacefully engaging with each other.

AM: Now you, as the Deputy – as a Tanaiste, Deputy Prime Minister, will be engaged of course in this summit that's coming up

SIMON COVENY, TD IRISH DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

now quite soon on the Brexit negotiations and all of that. You may have seen this morning that Theresa May has been given another seven red lines to take with her and they require things like a free trade deal without tariffs to be agreed by March 2019 and that being the basis of any money being passed over, the UK having the freedom to make and implement trade deals during the transition period. The European Court ceasing to have any jurisdiction whatsoever from March 2019. And so forth. Do you think those are goers when it comes? If Theresa May arrives with that kind of list what will happen to her?

SC: Well look you know I'm not going to comment on the demands that are being made of the British Prime Minister from her own party. I mean that's a matter for the Conservative Party to manage. It's certainly not a matter for me to comment on. What I would like to comment on though is a published report this week from the House of Commons on Brexit. And actually in that report they agree with the Irish government's position that there is a need for more clarity in the context of the border on the island of Ireland. They don't see how it's compatible that the United Kingdom as a whole, including Northern Ireland leaving the customs union and leaving the single market, actually works with the ambition to prevent a border on the island of Ireland.

AM: So it is argued, sorry –

SC: So you know the House of Commons Committee is actually making the same arguments that we are making as a government which I think hopefully reassures people that the Irish government is not being unreasonable here. We're simply asking questions that need more credible answers before we can allow this process to move onto phase 2.

AM: And what does the British government have to do to satisfy you? Is this something where drafting forms of words, vague talk about some technological solution could do it and allow the

SIMON COVENY, TD IRISH DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

negotiations to move to the next phase from the Irish government's point of view, or do you want absolute clarity about exactly how the British government intends to resolve this?

SC: No, I mean just to reassure people, we're not looking for the full detail of the border solution in phase one of these negotiations. We've never asked for that. What we are looking for though is the parameters within which we can be more confident that a solution can be found within phase 2 and that is not an unreasonable ask. And so what we're saying is that our preference, and our preference has always been, because it helps to deal with the politics of Unionism in Northern Ireland, we would like to see a solution here that solves the border issues, that involves all of the United Kingdom acting as one. But we also have to say that if that is not possible well then of course we need to recognise – both governments need to recognise – that Northern Ireland has unique challenges. And all parties in Northern Ireland need to be listened to, not just one, to ensure that we maintain and support peace and harmony on the island of Ireland which so many people have worked so hard to create over the last two decades.

Ends