

## Northern Ireland

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Sir Patrick Mayhew): With permission, I will make a statement about messages between the IRA leadership and the Government.

There has for some years been a means of communication by which messages could be conveyed indirectly between the Government and the IRA leadership. Clearly, such a chain could only function if its secrecy was respected on both sides.

At the end of February this year, a message was received from the IRA leadership. It said:

"The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold dialogue leading to peace. We cannot announce such a move as it will lead to confusion for the volunteers, because the press will misinterpret it as a surrender. We cannot meet Secretary of State's public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure that we were not being tricked".

That message came from Martin McGuinness. I have placed in the Library and in the Vote Office all consequent messages that Her Majesty's Government received and dispatched.

The Government had a duty to respond to that message. I will read to the House the substantive response that, after an intermediate exchange, we despatched on 19 March. The text published yesterday was no more than instructions as to how this was to be transmitted. The message was in these terms:

"1. The importance of what has been said, the wish to take it seriously, and the influence of events on the ground, have been acknowledged. All of those involved share a responsibility to work to end the conflict. No one has a monopoly of suffering. There is a need for a healing process.

2. It is essential that there should be no deception on either side, and also that no deception should, through any misunderstanding, be seen where it is not intended. It is also essential that both sides have a clear and realistic understanding of what it is possible to achieve, so that neither side can in the future claim that it has been tricked.

3. The position of the British Government on dealing with those who espouse violence is clearly understood. This is why the envisaged sequence of events is important. We note that what is being sought at this stage is advice, and that any dialogue would follow an unannounced halt to violent activity. We confirm that if violence had genuinely been brought to an end, whether or not that fact had been announced, then dialogue could take place.

4. It must be understood, though, that once a halt to activity became public, the British Government would have to acknowledge and defend its entry into dialogue. It would do so by pointing out that its agreement to exploratory dialogue about the possibility of an inclusive process had been given because—and only because—it had received a private assurance that organised violence had been brought to an end.

5. The British Government has made clear that:

- no political objective which is advocated by constitutional means alone could properly be excluded from discussion in the talks process;
- the commitment to return as much responsibility as possible to local politicians should be seen within a wider framework of stable relationships to be worked out with all concerned;
- new political arrangements would be designed to ensure that no legitimate group was excluded from eligibility to share in the exercise of this responsibility;
- in the event of a genuine and established ending of violence, the whole range of responses to it would inevitably be looked at afresh.

6. The British Government has no desire to inhibit or impede legitimate constitutional expression of any political opinion, or any input to the political process, and wants to see included in this process all main parties which have sufficiently shown they

genuinely do not espouse violence. It has no blueprint. It wants an agreed accommodation, not an imposed settlement, arrived at through an inclusive process in which the parties are free agents.

7. The British Government does not have, and will not adopt, any prior objective of 'ending of partition'. The British Government cannot enter a talks process, or expect others to do so, with the purpose of achieving a predetermined outcome, whether the 'ending of partition' or anything else. It has accepted that the eventual outcome of such a process could be a united Ireland, but only on the basis of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland."

[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

"Should this be the eventual outcome of a peaceful democratic process, the British Government would bring forward legislation to implement the will of the people here. But unless the people of Northern Ireland come to express such a view, the British Government will continue to uphold the union, seeking to ensure the good governance of Northern Ireland, in the interests of all its people, within the totality of relationships in these islands.

8. Evidence on the ground that any group had ceased violent activity would induce resulting reduction of security force activity. Were violence to end, the British Government's overall response in terms of security force activity on the ground would still have to take account of the overall threat. The threat posed by Republican and Loyalist groups which remained active would have to continue to be countered.

9. It is important to establish whether this provides a basis for the way forward. We are ready to answer specific questions or to give further explanation."

It is clear that that message was consistent with our declared policy: namely, that if such people wanted to enter into talks or negotiations with the Government they first had genuinely to end violence—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]  
—not just temporarily, but for good. If they did, and showed sufficiently that they meant it, we would not want, for our part, to continue to exclude them from political talks. That remains our policy.

The IRA sent a reply on 10 May which did not constitute the unequivocal assurance of a genuine end to violence on which we had insisted. Clearly, a temporary ceasefire would not do.

Substantive contact was resumed on 2 November. The IRA sent the following message:

"This problem cannot be solved by the Reynolds Spring situation, although they're part of it. You appear to have rejected the Hume Adams situation though they too are part of it.

Every day all the main players are looking for singular solutions. It can't be solved singularly. We offered the 10 May. You've rejected it. Now we can't even have dialogue to work out how a total end to all violence can come about. We believe that the country could be at the point of no return. In plain language please tell us through the link as a matter of urgency when you will open dialogue in the event of a total end to hostilities. We believe that if all the documents involved are put on the table—including your 9 paragrapher and our 10th May that we have the basis of an understanding."

Our reply was despatched on 5 November:

"1. Your message of 2 November is taken as being of the greatest importance and significance. The answer to the specific question you raise is given in paragraph 4 below.

2. We hold to what was said jointly and in public by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Brussels on 29 October. A copy of the Statement is annexed. There can be no departure from what is said there and in particular its statement that there could be no secret agreements or understandings between Governments and organisations supporting violence as a price for its cessation and its call on them to renounce for good the use of, or support for, violence. There can also be no departure from the constitutional guarantee that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people.

3. It is the public and consistent position of the British Government that any dialogue could only follow a permanent end to violent activity.

4. You ask about the sequence of events in the event of a total end to hostilities. If, as you have offered, you were to give us an unequivocal assurance that violence has indeed been brought to

[Mr. David Winnick]

While one acknowledges some of the problems that have undoubtedly arisen during the past few days, can the Secretary of State tell the House today that no steps will be taken to stop the summit that is to take place in Dublin between the British and Irish Prime Ministers?

Is there not a strong argument now for every possible step to be taken by both Governments, to see whether there is a possibility of an honourable agreement in Northern Ireland, recognising that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the United Kingdom but also—as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) said—that the legitimate aspirations of the nationalist community must be pursued, as the majority recognises, by peaceful means?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The hon. Gentleman always takes a courageous line in matters connected with Northern Ireland affairs. As to his first point, I acknowledge that there is an overpowering demand among the everyday people of Northern Ireland for an end to violence. However, they do not want peace at any price.

Recently, I attended a service for the association that represents disabled police officers, and I attended a memorial service for those who lost their lives in the prison service. The mothers, widows and other relations of those who have suffered hideous injuries or death say, "We want peace, but we do not want it at any price." It is terribly important to remember that, and it is never out of the Government's mind.

The hon. Gentleman asked that no steps be taken to frustrate the Dublin summit. I told the House that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach will be discussing over the next few days the date of the summit. On "The Frost Programme" recently, the Taoiseach said—I speak from memory rather than quoting his words exactly—that any solution emanating from one side alone could have no chance of success.

That certainly represents the British Government's view. We are at one in wanting violence to come to an end, but it must come to an end before there can be any negotiations or exploratory talks as to how parties may enter the constitutional talks process—from which they exclude themselves by perpetrating or justifying violence at present.

**Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire):** While those who have no responsibility in these matters can indulge in the semantic differences between communications, talks and negotiations, is it not the case that those who have that responsibility must deal with human life and limb, and with the wanton destruction of property? When this froth of mostly artificial rage has died down, will not the IRA leadership be left exposed for its utter cynicism in saying that it could stop the killing, but asking for some way of doing that while saving face?

Will my right hon. and learned Friend make it clear to the IRA leadership that there is no way that it can save face for its actions over the years? As long as my right hon. and learned Friend pursues with vigour and honour the path that he has chosen to try to bring the IRA to a peaceful means of discussing solutions, he will have the backing of every right-thinking person in this country and of most right hon. and non. Members.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. Cynicism is seen as a very strong suit of the IRA and of Sinn Fein, and especially of those who express regret for the entirely foreseeable and intended consequences of the violence that they perpetrate. That is extremely hard to bear for the hard-pressed people of Northern Ireland. Of course duties are placed upon those who have responsibility for every life in Northern Ireland, and they must face up to them. Others do not have the disciplines that responsibility imposes.

Yesterday, I watched my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) on "The Frost Programme", in which the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) also participated. My hon. Friend asked the hon. Member for Belfast, East—whose face was on the screen, transmitted from Northern Ireland—what the Government should have done in the face of the message. Should they have done nothing, or should they have responded? Answer came there none from the hon. Member for Belfast, East. But those with responsibility for lives in Northern Ireland must make up their minds—and they must take proper risks.

**Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East):** Can the Secretary of State confirm that those contacts did not just start with this particular round but, in the words of Lord Gowrie, contacts with the IRA were instrumental in bringing the hunger strike to a close, and certainly contacts were still continuing between Sinn Fein and officials at the Northern Ireland Office in 1983 when the Greater London council delegation met Gerry Adams for the first time?

Does the Secretary of State agree that part of his problem with the public and media response to this news is not that talks or contacts have been taking place, but that successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and the former Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, have roundly condemned anyone who went openly, and in front of the public, and discussed with the leadership of Sinn Fein? They were condemned for doing openly what the Government have been doing behind the backs of the British people and the people of Northern Ireland.

Does the Secretary of State also agree that most people outside the House will not be terribly concerned, because this is more of a parliamentary point. People outside the House will be amazed, however, given the terms that Martin McGuinness used in his contacts with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and they will ask, "Why did not the British Government have more imagination in seizing the opportunity? Where is the imagination in their response that is shown by people like Rabin or de Klerk?" Why is imagination so lacking on the Conservative Benches? Is it because the Conservatives rely on the votes of the Ulster Unionists?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I think that what the hon. Gentleman would describe as imagination, most of the people of our country would describe as appeasement—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]—feeding those who, in a democracy, know that they cannot attain their political objectives by the ballot box and therefore bring bombs and bullets to the conference table, to the discussions, to fortify their case. That is what I think that the hon. Gentleman would have described as an imaginative response but I and, I think, most people in our country would describe it as a disgraceful response.

I believe that the Government have made an entirely proper, and certainly understood, distinction—that once one has shown oneself qualified to become a constitutional political party, one may take one's place in the political arena. As long as one shows oneself not to be able to accept the disciplines of democratic and constitutional politics, one excludes oneself.

**Mr. Peter Robinson** (Belfast, East): Does the Secretary of State recall that he took part in BBC "Breakfast Time" on 16 November and that during that programme he made three denials? First, he denied that there were contacts through emissaries between the Government and the Provisional IRA or Sinn Fein. He also denied that there were talks between the Government and the IRA, and he denied that there were negotiations between the Government and the IRA. Do not the papers that the Secretary of State has selected to put in the Library today indicate that such contacts did take place? If there were no talks, why was his emissary sent off to do the job with speaking notes?

Does the Secretary of State recognise that he needs more than the confidence of his colleagues in the House to do his job and to do it well; that he needs the confidence of the people of Northern Ireland, and that he does not have it any more?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: I have heard the hon. Gentleman proclaiming that for some time. I walk about as much as I can in the streets of Northern Ireland to talk to people, and I seem to get a reasonable and—I am very grateful for it—friendly reception. The hon. Gentleman speaks of BBC "Breakfast Time." It is certainly true that I took part in BBC breakfast television on 16 November. I was asked this question:

"Let's look further at what Gerry Adams was saying last night."

As I have already said, and I think the House has recognised, Gerry Adams has been putting it about that we

"Has there been contact between people who could be regarded as emissaries or representatives of the Government?"

I said:

"No, there hasn't. There has been no negotiating with Sinn Fein; no official, as I see it is alleged" has been

"talking to Sinn Fein on behalf of the British Government. We have always made it perfectly clear that there is going to be no negotiating with anybody who perpetrates or justifies the use of violence. That's been our public policy, and it is our private policy and we have stuck to it."

The question was asked:

"You choose your words, I am sure, very carefully. You say no negotiating, but perhaps there have been exploratory talks at some level?"

I replied:

"There has been no talking whatsoever about what is to be a price, if there is to be any price for the giving up of violence or anything of that sort, which is what is alleged, nothing of that kind at all. We have always said that there is to be no bargaining whatsoever with people who espouse, who perpetrate violence, and that's absolutely the case. Nobody on the part of the British Government has done that or anything like it."

I stand by that. I made it perfectly clear what I was replying to, and I stand by that answer. I do not make any apology to the hon. Gentleman or to the House for, as the questioner put it, choosing my words carefully. Of course I was not going to volunteer that there was a channel of communication, which was one whose value has been maintained for, as has been clear, many years—20 years.

Supposing the time were to come when the IRA were to say, however belatedly, that the conflict was over and that they needed advice only as to how it was to be tied up, am I to have supposed that the public would have been better served if there had been no such channel—if there had been no means by which the IRA could send a message? If that is what the hon. Gentleman is saying, I do not think that the House is with him. This stuff about "Of course there have been talks—how could there be a speaking note otherwise?" is a lot of rubbish.

**Mr. Eddie McGrady** (South Down): I ask the Secretary of State to take comfort from the fact that the people of Northern Ireland—at least in my constituency, which he knows is roughly half and half Unionist and Nationalist and which genuinely reflects the ordinary people of Northern Ireland—want him to continue the peace process. They do not want him to be deflected by the rituals of the House or the deliberate diversions of the hon. Member for Antrim, North (Rev. Ian Paisley) but to concentrate on the core issue of pursuit of peace.

Alongside that, in parallel to it, are the inter-party talks. I ask the Secretary of State to accelerate those, so that they may run in parallel with the peace initiative. Perhaps at those talks he can advise and, one hopes, convince the members of the Unionist parties that there is nothing—nothing at all—to fear in peace. That would create a new dimension for us all.

I ask the Secretary of State to convey to his right hon. colleague the Prime Minister the fact that a lot rests on his shoulders and that, although the Secretary of State terminated his statement with the words

"The key to peace is in the hands of the IRA", it is a combination lock and the Prime Minister holds the other key to that process.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I know how closely he is in touch with the opinions of his constituents because I visited his constituency with him not long ago. Of course there is a desire for peace and I will not repeat what I have said about that and the qualification that the people of Northern Ireland place upon it.

There is no need to urge me or my right hon. Friend to press on with the political talks. Those are very important and much progress is being made, albeit in a different format from last year. I believe that the hon. G would acknowledge that the Unionist parties played a valuable part in that process, as he did himself and as did his party, and that much progress was made towards contingent agreement.

I therefore think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who has heard what the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) said, needs no encouragement in the direction that the hon. Gentleman urged. However, in our search for peace, it is no good looking for a solution to the problems that emanates only from one quarter. It must again be brought to the attention of the House that both Governments, at the end of the Brussels summit on 29 October, said that there could be no question of the Government's accepting and endorsing the report of the Hume-Adams dialogue that had been given to the Taoiseach, although not to the Prime Minister.

**Mr. Peter Bottomley** (Eltham): At the beginning of today, some people in the media were making much of an apparent difference of evidence between the provisional

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

Sinn Fein and the Government. Having seen the evidence and heard the speech of my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State, people here and outside—in Northern Ireland, in the Republic and in Great Britain—will think that he is to be trusted and supported, and that what he has done is right.

Can I go further and say to those who are not here—the torturers and murderers, and those who make women into widows and children into orphans—that they still have the responsibility, which they appeared to show in February, that they realise that the past 20 years and the 3,000 lives have not got anywhere near their aims, and they will not get near their aims? The sooner they bring an end to violence, get into talks and become constitutional parties, the better it will be for everyone.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The message that my hon. Friend has given to those outside, especially those who use or justify terrorism, is an important one. It comes with great authority because of his record of service in Northern Ireland and continuing interest thereafter. I am grateful for what he said at the beginning of his question. I have watched with admiration his contributions to various programmes, and I am extremely grateful for his support.

**Mr. William Ross (Londonderry, East):** In his statement, the Secretary of State used the terms "Sinn Fein" and "IRA" as though they were interchangeable and simply different faces of the same creature. If that is so, is he treating all the papers that he published today as coming from and being directed at the same organisation? Can he give an assurance that all the papers and contacts, with the reports of the messengers, have been published? Since the roots of this lie further back than February, will he publish all the papers from at least 1990 until the present time?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I do not propose to accede to the hon. Gentleman's last request. I agree that there is a distinction to be made between Sinn Fein and the IRA. Sinn Fein is a political party. In many instances, members of Sinn Fein are spokespersons for the IRA. But the two organisations are not the same, although there is a substantial overlap.

The bundle of documents that they have published include the messages that we received—they were mostly orally transmitted, as is clear from the beginning—from Martin McGuinness and others. We think it right to characterise that as messages coming from the leadership of the IRA, and replies consequential of the first message in February have been sent through the chain of communication to the same people.

**Mr. Michael Jopling (Westmorland and Lonsdale):** Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that many people will not be surprised, nor wish to have been told, that private indirect communication links have existed for some time? Does he agree that, if eventually we are to get formal negotiations started on the conditions laid down by the Government, the violence should have come to an end? It is almost inconceivable for those negotiations to open without some preliminary discussions of that sort earlier.

Finally, will he tell the House what he meant when he said at the beginning of his statement that the links have existed for many years? Is it true that the links have existed for many years, and if so, how many?

**Mr. Molyneux:** About 20 years.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** As the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Molyneux) says, the links have existed for some 20 years, and they have shown their value. I recognise what my right hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Jopling) said about the great value of the opportunity to pass communications in each direction if we are ever to reach a stage at which negotiations can take place.

I believe that that was rightly expressed in the leading article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, which said that the time for negotiations has not yet arrived. That time can arrive only when an end of violence has genuinely occurred, but before that, there must be a means by which the two sides can pass messages one to the other, and do it in secret.

**Mr. Jeff Rooker (Birmingham, Perry Barr):** Does the Secretary of State accept that, following the exchanges that have occurred this afternoon and the publication of documents yesterday, the majority of my constituents in Birmingham will basically say, "Thank God someone was searching for peace"? Searching for peace does not mean that one is soft on terrorism. That has clearly come across this afternoon, and I say thank God for that too.

A couple of weeks ago in my constituency, two local councillors from Northern Ireland told me the people of Northern Ireland are afraid that the House of Commons is not interested—every time there is a debate or questions asked about Northern Ireland, the benches are green. The exchanges and the attendance this afternoon will signal to the people of Northern Ireland that the House of Commons, while it is not the place to negotiate, wants peace not at any price but peace that is honourably sought by all parties.

If we can still, in the words of one of the leaders in the newspaper this morning, hear the sound of silence of the Armalites for the foreseeable future, will the prospective exploratory meeting that was promised in the November exchange to start the week after we return in January still take place?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I shall deal with the last part first. I am not interested in ceasefires, with their implicit threat of a resumption, unless something is yielded in the meantime. There must be an assertion that violence is at an end, and that must be made perfectly clear.

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about the need for people in Northern Ireland to believe that the House of Commons is concerned about them. Today, I entirely recognise that it is abundantly clear for all to see the concern that exists. Perhaps I will be forgiven if I go back to what I said towards the end of my statement. I quote:

"Murder in Northern Ireland is no more tolerable than murder anywhere else in the United Kingdom. We must never lose sight of the fact that it is the terrorists who must answer for the deaths, destruction and misery over the past 25 years."

We must never allow ourselves to become inured to what might sometimes be suspected—that there is a tolerable level of murder and violence. There is no acceptable level of violence. I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said about the message that goes forth from the House today.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Speaker:** I see those hon. Members who are standing and I have a note of their names. I ask now for

brisk questions and brisk answers so that I can call all those hon. Members who are currently standing.

**Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East):** I endorse what has been said by hon. Members on both sides of the House. As a member of the British-Irish parliamentary body, I must say that, far from apologising, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister should be not proud—that is the wrong word—but glad that this has now been revealed through one circumstance or another, because this is the way forward, and the opportunity is great.

Can my right hon. and learned Friend—I entirely accept that he is speaking theoretically at this stage—indicate possibly and putatively what might be the scenario leading to the next stage of possible peace talks developing?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** Speaking briskly, that must depend on how the IRA behaves. We have made clear what is an absolute requirement by way of precondition. It is for the IRA to say and show whether that will happen. As to the rest of the question, I believe that what we have said in the bundle of documents provides an answer.

**Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford):** The way forward in Northern Ireland is to ensure that there is trust in our Government within the community, irrespective of which party forms that Government in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State dismisses too lightly the reality that there is little trust in the Government in Northern Ireland at present.

When people heard him say on that BBC television programme on 16 November that there were no contacts, and then we saw the revelations this weekend, people lost trust and confidence. Younger people then move towards the loyalist paramilitaries. That trend is becoming more dangerous, and should not be ignored by this Parliament. Will the Secretary of State urge the Government to try to restore greater confidence among the majority Unionist community by reaching policy decisions which will gain their support? Secondly, are the Government in contact, through intermediaries or otherwise, with the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association or the Ulster Freedom Fighters?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I note what the hon. Gentleman says about the breakfast programme. I have read the question that I was asked, and the reply that I gave. I am not going to describe the character of the chain of communication, but I am entirely satisfied that what I said was accurate. I believe that I am entirely justified in saying that.

Naturally, I recognise the importance of trust, but that trust would not have taken a turn for the better if it were known that I had quite unnecessarily volunteered the existence of a chain of communication. That chain, at that time, was being used for a process which offered the possibility—it is not for me to say whether it was a probability—of ending the violence which has lasted for 25 years. I would have wantonly destroyed that chain by destroying its secrecy.

I entirely agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the importance of trust. As for contact with the organisations to which the hon. Gentleman referred, the situation is precisely as I have described it. There will be

no negotiations with them, and there is no similar chain or channel of communication with them, as has been the case for so long with the leadership of the IRA.

**Mr. Roger Knapman (Stroud):** May I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on his statement, for which I greatly admire him? Is it not immensely sad that he should be criticised most strongly by those who potentially have the most to gain?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** Briskly, I am grateful. Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend.

**Mr. Bob Cryer (Bradford, South):** Why should hon. Members and the public be denied the full information on the peace debate while the Government are secretly negotiating with Sinn Fein? At the same time, the Government are condemning those people such as myself who wanted to urge on the peace process by entering into negotiations with that very body. Is it not time, since the process is now in the open, that the absurd restrictions in which actors mimic the voices of the representatives of Sinn Fein should be removed? Is that a card which the Secretary of State is holding in his negotiations?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I have watched the hon. Gentleman pointing his finger at Conservative Members for all the time that we have been in the House together. That does not make more sensible a question that is based upon a false premise, which is that we have been negotiating with Sinn Fein. That is absolutely wrong.

The hon. Gentleman's point about whether the broadcasting restrictions should remain is a separate matter, and that is for the Secretary of State for National Heritage to decide. I will point to out to the hon. Gentleman that much tougher restrictions have been in place in the Republic for longer.

**Mr. Winston Churchill (Davyhulme):** Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that the overwhelming majority of hon. Members will feel that he and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have acted with honour and responsibility in the matter? Furthermore, is it not the case that they were quite right to respond as they did to the remarkable message from the IRA of last February? No blame can be attached to them for the fact that they were less than frank with the House in pursuing the initiatives for peace, with which we wish them well.

Given the Government's prompt and fulsome response earlier this year and more recently is it not clear that the burden of responsibility for the continuation of carnage on both sides of the water rests squarely with the provisional IRA? The IRA could have peace tomorrow if it was to set aside the Armalite and put away the bomb. Is that not the next step on the agenda?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** My hon. Friend, of course, is absolutely right, and that is the crucially important point. We are in a democracy, and those people know perfectly well that they cannot get their way by the democratic process. Therefore, they bring bombs and bullets to give force to their argument. They must never be appeased, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am grateful to him for what he has said.

I take issue gently with his assertion that we have been less than frank to the House. We have not volunteered—it would have been wanton to do so—the existence of a secret chain of communication that has a value which is

[*Sir Patrick Mayhew*]

recognised by all hon. Members. That chain would have been destroyed had we volunteered that it was in existence and that it was being used currently for the purposes which the House now knows about.

**Mr. Roy Beggs** (Antrim, East): The Secretary of State will be aware of the warm reception which he received earlier this year in my constituency. I must say with some regret that many of those people who welcomed him warmly have a deep sense of betrayal and bitterness with regard to the recent disclosures.

Has the Secretary of State, on reflection, been too economical with the truth with regard to the contacts with the IRA and with Sinn Fein? What assurance can he give which would enable me to encourage my constituents to welcome him warmly should he visit us again? Will the Secretary of State restate the conditions under which the meeting that is scheduled for January might go ahead?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The hon. Gentleman reminds me of the welcome that I received when I went to his constituency. I am glad that some of the welcome was for me. I thought that it was more for the Prime Minister, who was also present. I look forward to visiting his constituency again.

The hon. Gentleman said that I had been economical with the truth. The House will know that he means that I have been dishonest with the people in Northern Ireland. I have not, and it would be better if the hon. Gentleman said so.

**Mr. Skinner:** He would have been thrown out if he had.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I agree that certain restraints are imposed upon the clarity of the utterances which adhere to Ulster hon. Members. I accept that.

I have already said why I reject that charge. In the light of Madam Speaker's ruling, I am not going to take time to say it all again. Time has elapsed and the offer, which was made in circumstances which were perfectly clear and which were dependent upon a declaration that violence was at an end, no longer stands, because that declaration has not come. If it were to come, the matter would be reopened.

**Lady Olga Maitland** (Sutton and Cheam): May I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on his endeavours in maintaining contact? I agree totally that, had he not done so, it would have been a great dereliction of his duties.

Does he agree that, while the IRA says it wishes to end conflict, those fine words are not matched by fine deeds? Murderous events have happened ever since. Therefore, will he continue with his endeavours to combat terrorism, with all the methods at his command? In whatever develops, will my right hon. and learned Friend bear in mind the fact that 65 per cent. of the people in Northern Ireland voted for the Union with Great Britain in the previous general election?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** My hon. Friend takes such an interest in Northern Ireland matters, and is such a frequent visitor, that she speaks with particular knowledge. She could perhaps slightly increase the strength of her case. I believe that 67 per cent. voted for one of the three parties which support the maintenance of the Union as an act of policy.

**Sir James Kilfedder:** There are four parties.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I beg my hon. Friend's pardon. There are in fact four parties. I am getting into deeper and deeper water.

My hon. Friend speaks with great authority. The fine words, as she put it, of the IRA and the leadership of the IRA have not been matched, and perfectly inexcusable outrages have occurred. That is why I assure my hon. Friend that the Chief Constable and the General Officer Commanding, with the full support of the Government, will bear down as hard as is possible by all lawful means upon those who resort to violence.

**Mr. David Trimble** (Upper Bann): It would have been preferable if the documents had been available to us at an earlier stage so that we could have studied them. However, I have already noticed two points. The document setting out the Government message of 17 July says:

"consideration was being given at the highest level to a far-reaching response."

What was that response, and was it delivered?

Secondly, there is reference to "unauthorised contacts" with Sinn Fein IRA, in addition to authorised contact. I understand from the briefings given by the Northern Ireland Office to the press that that unauthorised contact included members of MI6, or the Secret Intelligence Service, during 1991 and 1992. Is that the same as the contact that Mr. McGuinness claims that he had with what he called a British Foreign Office official in the spring of 1990?

When did the unauthorised activity by the secret intelligence service begin, when did it end, what measures have been taken to bring the SIS under control, and what disciplinary action has been taken with regard to the officers who engaged in that unauthorised activity?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am not prepared to say more than I said at a press conference in Northern Ireland yesterday, which is that it has come to our notice that there were probably two instances over the past three or so years where unauthorised contact was made by somebody in an official position.

**Mr. Peter Robinson:** It was authorised.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** It was unauthorised by the British Government. Nothing derived from that contact in each instance that affected any message subsequently sent in the manner that I have described to the House by the British Government to the leadership of the IRA. I am not prepared to say any more than that.

As to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, a reply to the message of 10 May was not, in the event, sent, for the reasons that are set out in the document of 17 July.

**Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): My right hon. and learned Friend will be conscious of the deep desire in all parts of the House that his stewardship should be crowned with the success of a just and lasting peace that is not an accommodation of terrorism and that is fully in line with the principles of constitutional democratic government.

In the pursuit of that objective, for which most reasonable people will give him a wide degree of latitude and discretion, can he bear in mind the fact that, time and time again since 1969, successive Secretaries of State have realised that seeking to reduce the alienation of the violent

minority which constitutes the IRA-Sinn Fein should never be sought at the expense of alienating the Loyalist majority in the Province?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** My hon. Friend eloquently expresses the hopes of all of us, but it is no good addressing the problem in a way that results in the transferring of violence from one end of the political spectrum to the other. That is what would happen in certain circumstances.

I readily acknowledge the need to reassure those who constitute the greater number of people living in Northern Ireland—those who wish to see the union within the United Kingdom maintained—that the Government will continue always to stand behind the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. That is the fundamental reassurance they need, and it is one that has been given as authoritatively as possible. It is meant by the Government and every Minister.

**Mr. Geoffrey Hoon (Ashfield):** Will the Secretary of State explain why he has refused to publish the exchanges between the Government and the Provisional movement in the period before 22 February 1993? In particular, will he give further consideration to whether he should publish the text of any message sent by the British Government immediately before that date?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I can assure the House that the message received in February, which begins the published body of messages, was not one that had been prompted by us or heralded. It would not be right to publish, to however far back I was asked to publish, all the records of the messages sent back and forth by that means of communication. It would not be in the public interest to do so. It might very well encroach upon intelligence matters that, as will be widely understood, should not be published. I shall give further consideration to the matter, but I do not hold out any expectation, or offer any commitment, that I would think it right to do so.

**Mr. Quentin Davies (Stamford and Spalding):** The House has always had a high regard for the integrity and judgment of my right hon. and learned Friend, and that has been clearly reflected this afternoon. Does he agree that the IRA is a criminal organisation, and one involved in the very worst form of crime—murder—and it should be dealt with only on that basis?

Does he also agree that, while it is legitimate to use the democratic process to campaign for a united Ireland, it would be a devastating day for democracy if the idea ever

arose that a group that owed its power not to the ballot box but to the bullet could influence the future shape of political and constitutional arrangements?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** My hon. Friend is right, and that is at the basis of the defence that is necessary for democracy. It is always expensive to defend democracy, but the country has had some experience of that, and knows that the price is always worth paying. The Provisional IRA resorts to criminal methods and therefore can be characterised as a criminal organisation, and it must never be enabled to influence constitutional development by resorting to violence. In thanks for the kind words with which my hon. Friend began, I bow towards him.

**Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby):** I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is pleased to know that I appear to be the last Back Bencher rising to ask him a question in this marathon. Does he accept that it now appears, regrettably, that the whole business, from the first message in February from McGuinness to the statement made this morning by Adams, has been nothing more than a political ploy? There has never been any hope of the IRA giving up violence.

Does he accept that what happened arose entirely from Sinn Fein's desire to make political capital? Does he therefore agree that the extraordinary reaction—the hypercritical and naive reaction—of almost all the press, many politicians and some hon. Members today, criticising the Government has played into the hands of the IRA, given Sinn Fein its political capital and is giving comfort to those evil terrorists who are the enemies of the House, the United Kingdom and the people of Northern Ireland?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It may prove to be the case that nothing will come, and that nothing ever would have come, from the message that we received in February. That was not an assumption that was open to us, in duty, to make. There was always hope that it would, but so far that hope has been dashed. It may be that it was nothing more than a political ploy. All must hope that that was not the case. It was not open to us to treat it on that basis.

The concluding part of my hon. Friend's question related to the way in which the Government's response has been addressed. Yesterday, at a press conference in Northern Ireland, I mildly observed that, from the tone of some of the questions addressed to me, it might be thought that it was not the IRA but the Government who had bombed the Shankill.