

Northern Ireland (Mitchell Report)

3.31 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. John Major): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the report of the international body on the decommissioning of illegal arms, which was published earlier today.

The key to progress in Northern Ireland is confidence—confidence to enable the parties to sit down together without threat of force. The retention of arms by the paramilitaries on both sides is the biggest single factor in holding back that confidence. It has so far prevented the holding of all-party talks. That is one of the reasons why we and the Irish Government established the international body, to provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue as one track of the twin-tracks initiative that John Bruton and I launched last November.

The body's remit was to identify and advise on acceptable methods of verifiable decommissioning, and then to report on the commitment of the paramilitaries to work constructively to achieve that. We set the body the challenging target of reporting by mid January. I am extremely grateful to Senator Mitchell and his colleagues, the former Prime Minister of Finland, Harri Holkeri, and General John de Charteilain, for the energy and determination with which they have completed this difficult task.

The body's main conclusions are: first, that the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations has nearly universal support and must continue to be a principal objective; secondly, that to reach an agreed political settlement and take the gun out of politics, all parties should commit themselves to, and honour, six principles embodying the path of democracy and non-violence. These principles include the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations; the renunciation of force and the threat of force; agreement to abide peacefully by whatever agreement is finally reached; and an end to so-called punishment killings and beatings.

Thirdly, the body concludes that there is a clear commitment on the part of those in possession of illegal arms to work constructively to achieve full and verifiable decommissioning as part of the process of all-party negotiations. The body makes a series of recommendations on the modalities of decommissioning of illegal arms. It emphatically declares that there is no equivalence between such arms and those held by the security forces. It rightly emphasises the need for independent verification.

Fourthly, the body concludes that other confidence-building measures are needed, such as an end to targeting of potential victims by the paramilitaries, information on missing persons and the return of those previously intimidated out of their homes.

The body also records its conclusion, on the basis of its discussions, that the paramilitaries will not decommission any arms prior to all-party negotiations. The House will note that the body did not conclude that it cannot decommission; the body concluded that it will not, and the House will draw its own conclusions. Although the body makes no formal recommendation on this point, it suggests an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all-party negotiations.

The Government welcome the body's endorsement of the seriousness of the decommissioning issue. We welcome and fully endorse the six principles that it sets out. We call on each and every one of the parties to do the same, speedily and unequivocally.

If all concerned were to accept those principles, and honour them, as the international body also rightly emphasised, that would be a significant step forward. Even more significant would be if, in addition, all parties, particularly Sinn Fein, also joined the two Governments in supporting the wide principles of consent set out in the Downing street declaration.

The Government also welcome the body's broad recommendations on the modalities of the decommissioning process. We are ready to implement them. It is now for those in possession of illegal arms to say whether they will accept and act upon them. We look forward to an early and definitive response from the paramilitaries on both sides.

We welcome, too, the emphasis on other confidence-building measures. If the paramilitaries give up their present practice of keeping themselves ready for a return to action, that will be a most welcome sign of real commitment to peaceful methods. Otherwise, gun law continues to hang over the heads of the people in Northern Ireland.

There is therefore much in the report that we can welcome and endorse. But the practical problem remains—how to bring all the parties together. Self-evidently, the best way to generate the necessary confidence is for the paramilitaries to make a start on the decommissioning process. We see no reason why they should not do so.

There can be no justification for the maintenance of private armies by those who claim to be committed to exclusively peaceful means. Opinion polls in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have shown overwhelming public support in both communities for decommissioning before talks. We shall therefore keep up the pressure for an immediate start to the process.

However, I am not prepared to accept that any one group should, through its intransigence, stand in the way of peace and a comprehensive settlement for the people of Northern Ireland. We will not be deflected from our aim. It is now apparent that there may well be another way forward, consistent with the basic principles to which we have always adhered.

One of the confidence-building measures taken up by the international body is the idea of an election. The body made it clear that a broadly acceptable elective process, with an appropriate mandate and within the three-strand structure, could contribute to the building of confidence.

The Government believe that such an elective process offers a viable alternative direct route to the confidence necessary to bring about all-party negotiations. In that context, it is possible to imagine decommissioning and such negotiations being taken forward in parallel.

The election proposal originated in Northern Ireland and, as recent opinion polls have shown, has widespread cross-community support there. A number of parties, including those led by the hon. Members for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), as well as the Alliance party, have put forward proposals for some form of elected body as a means of getting all parties talking together, even if the paramilitaries persist in their refusal to decommission prior to negotiation.

[The Prime Minister]

It is true that other parties have registered their concerns; they will certainly need to be addressed. We will discuss urgently with all the parties how to overcome them. But, in a democratic system such as ours, I cannot see how elections could be regarded by any of the parties either as a side issue or as a block to progress.

As the Mitchell report says:

"Elections held in accordance with democratic principles express and reflect the popular will".

So let me make it quite clear to the House that we are ready to introduce legislation, and to seek both Houses' urgent approval for it, in order to allow such an elective process to go ahead as soon as may be practicable. I hope that this will attract support right across the House.

To sum up, we believe that, in the light of the Mitchell report, there are two ways in which all-party negotiations can now be taken forward. Both are fully consistent with the six principles set out in the report. The first is for the paramilitaries to make a start to decommissioning before all-party negotiations. They can—if they will. If not, the second is to secure a democratic mandate for all-party negotiations through elections specially for that purpose.

Those are two routes to all-party negotiations and to decommissioning. The choice between them is ultimately for the parties themselves. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland have every right to expect that one or other of those routes will be taken, and taken soon. For our part, we, together with the Irish Government, will intensify our discussions with the parties. I intend to meet the Taoiseach again in the middle of February to review progress.

The people of Northern Ireland are enjoying today's peace. They wish it to be permanent. They also want and deserve political progress. It is time to put the old enmities to one side, and to allow the people of Northern Ireland and their representatives once again to have a normal say in their future and their affairs.

The proposals that I have put forward today require all concerned to take risks for peace. We have done so before, and we will do so again. Consistent with our principles, we will pursue this process. That is what is needed if we are to build on the achievements of the past two years.

Let us never forget that we are dealing here with the lives of innocent men, women and children. We are dealing with their future, and with the future of Northern Ireland. In the end, our obligations as politicians—as the House of Commons—are to the people whom we govern.

I pledge that I will leave no stone unturned to deliver to the people of Northern Ireland, on a permanent basis, the precious privilege of peace that they have enjoyed for the past 17 months.

Mr. Tony Blair (Sedgefield): I join the Prime Minister in welcoming the report produced by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues, who have been subject to a punishing schedule to produce the report in just eight weeks. I know that the whole House will be grateful to them.

I consider the report constructive and helpful, although it leaves a number of difficult questions unanswered. Those questions will be addressed in the no doubt

intensive discussions between the two Governments and all parties. The report provides certain important elements that can help to move the peace process forward.

I, too, endorse the six principles set out by Senator Mitchell, and hope that other parties will as well. In particular, I endorse the commitment to democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues and to the ending of punishment killings and beatings which should stop at once. They have no legitimacy. They are simply terrorism in a different form, and they damage the process of peace.

I spell out our firm belief that, if trust is to be established, it must and it should be made clear by all parties that any final settlement will be dependent on the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, and the message that that is emphasised, the better. Senator Mitchell's report has set out in some detail the modalities of decommissioning paramilitary weapons, including my recommendation that it be verified by an independent body, and we, like the Prime Minister, endorse that. Will the Prime Minister perhaps explain how the Government propose to move forward on the creation of an international commission to verify decommissioning?

At the heart of this issue is how we now move to all-party talks. For that to happen, there must be confidence—particular confidence among all parties—that violence is gone for good and been replaced by democratic debate. May I therefore reiterate our support for the view that confidence cannot arise unless there is tangible evidence of the commitment to democratic means?

We remain of the view that the simplest way of providing that tangible evidence is indeed the decommissioning of weapons. It is right in itself. People in all communities want it. It will strike any reasonable person as sensible. Senator Mitchell says that it will occur, in his view, before talks. May I stress that, if it is so, it is incumbent on those making it so to engage other means of building confidence. We accept the other forward proposed by the Government. Perhaps the Prime Minister can assure us that the Government will consider, of course, other options put forward by the parties themselves.

The report makes reference to the possible role of an elective process—perhaps I can say a word about that. We agree that this proposal deserves serious consideration. Will the Prime Minister tell us what, in his view, will be the nature of the mandate and the time scale of such a process?

Will he confirm that an elective process would be a mechanism for substantive negotiations? If it is, how does it fit in the three-stranded process to which the British and Irish Governments are committed? How does he intend to deal with what he accepts are the concerns of other parties about the elective body? As the Prime Minister mentioned in his statement the issue of legislation, may I say that if legislation is forthcoming and there exists the agreement necessary for it to work, for our part, we will be happy to co-operate in putting that legislation before Parliament.

The Labour party has adopted a bipartisan approach to the peace process. We have consistently supported the Government on it because we believe it to be the right way. We believe that the issues connected with it should be dealt with in normal party politics. I reaffirm that bipartisan approach and our belief that the Government must, of

make every effort to carry all parties with it. As each day passes, the benefits of peace in Northern Ireland become clearer. Although formidable obstacles remain—of course they do—peace is the only sane path to take for the future. We have offered, and we offer again today, our unqualified support in pursuing it.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the international body, for the report and for the specific points that he has made in the past few moments. He said that the principal Opposition party, the Labour party, has adopted a bipartisan approach to this process. That is most certainly so, in public and in private. I am grateful for that, and the process itself has been the stronger for that bipartisan approach.

On the specific points made by the right hon. Gentleman, I am pleased at his endorsement of the six principles, and I concur with the points that he made about them. He shares my firm belief that any final settlement must have the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

In response to his question, let me reaffirm again to the House that, at the conclusion of the talks process, the outcome of that talks process will be put, by means of a referendum, for endorsement by all the people in Northern Ireland. I announced that some time ago, and I reaffirm yet again that that is the case. I think that, in these circumstances, that consent will be necessary.

The right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) is correct to talk about the need for verification of decommissioning. The international body's report deals specifically with that. We will need to discuss with the Irish Government the mechanism for establishing an international commission, but I see no great difficulties with it. I think that we would look for distinguished individuals, who would act as an independent body, to verify the manner and certainty of the weapons decommissioning.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that confidence requires tangible evidence of democratic views. He is right also to share my view that there is no justification for decommissioning not starting now, and that, in the event that it does not, those who have refused to do so have a special obligation to see how the process proceeds.

As we proceed, of course we will look at other options that are brought before us. We have always made it clear that we have an open mind to consider options that will carry the confidence of all the parties and people of Northern Ireland towards getting people together in talks—leading to negotiations, to a settlement, to a referendum and to the House's approval of the outcome.

As for the election and the purposes for which it could be used, I see it being used to determine which parties would participate in the talks, and to give each party with elected representation a fresh electoral mandate—testing the extent of its democratic support in current circumstances. I see the election providing a pool of representatives from which party delegations to the talks could be drawn, and a means to index the strength of the parties' delegations in the talks process. Apart from that, of course, I see the election providing, by weighted majority vote, an initial mechanism for testing widespread acceptability within Northern Ireland of the outcome of any talks process.

We will, of course, consider people's concerns as we do that. Again, I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Sedgefield for his confirmation that, when the time might be appropriate to introduce such legislation—I hope that it will not be too long delayed—the official Opposition will co-operate in its swift and comprehensive passage.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): In order to establish the necessary confidence, the Mitchell report sets out six principles, which we accept. It also sets out certain confidence-building measures, such as the elected body, which, in view of the refusal of Sinn Fein-IRA to make the necessary moves in relation to weapons, we regard as the only way forward. Does the Prime Minister realise that, in an opinion poll published in Belfast last week, the concept of an elected body was endorsed by 70 per cent. of the people of Northern Ireland—and, indeed, by 68 per cent. of the supporters of the party led by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume)?

We welcome the Prime Minister's reference to urgent discussions to overcome any difficulties there may be about this proposal. Does the Prime Minister know that, in recent weeks, our party has been engaged in a series of meetings with other parties, including the SDLP, on this and related issues, and that our belief is that those problems can be overcome if there is the necessary will?

We also welcome the statement by the Leader of the Opposition about assistance for the necessary legislation. We believe that such legislation can be carried through the House very quickly, and that we should set the target of elections in April and May this year so that the elected body can get down work as soon as possible, and thereby open the way to decommissioning and substantive negotiations.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his response to what I had to say, and to the report before the House. I am pleased at his unequivocal support for the six principles. I hope that such unequivocal support will come from all the parties that are concerned with these negotiations.

I was, of course, aware of the opinion poll to which the hon. Gentleman referred. I am also aware of similar opinion polls that have been conducted in the Republic of Ireland on similar matters, which produced broadly similar majorities for an elected body and decommissioning. I was aware that the hon. Gentleman and his party had been considering this approach, and were discussing it among themselves, and I welcome his confirmation that he would be prepared to take part in discussions about this proposal in the future.

It is my wish that we shall be able to take all parties with us and move forward with this process. If decommissioning does not take place and it is necessary to use that route, I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party and others will be able to move forward swiftly so that we can make early and tangible progress, for that is what people of both communities in Northern Ireland urgently wish to see.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Does my right hon. Friend accept that many of us recognise that it was an act of courage to entrust that task to the independent body? If people thought that its task would be easy, the chillingly blunt refusal that it received of the suggestion of any decommissioning will have made them realise how difficult this issue is.

[Mr. Tom King]

May I endorse what the Leader of the Opposition said: that that blunt refusal makes much more difficult Sinn Fein-IRA's task of persuading people of their adherence to the six principles and of building the trust which the independent body says is so essential to this process? Does my right hon. Friend accept, however, that his determination to build on the positive aspects of this report, despite some disappointment with it, and to seek to continue, with the courage that he has shown, to carry forward his determined effort for lasting peace, must receive the support it deserves?

The Prime Minister: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend. As he said, we asked the international body to undertake a difficult job, with no certainty that it would be able to make progress. I believe that it has done so comprehensively and well. It is fair to say—indeed, Senator Mitchell would acknowledge this—that the report does not offer a single party connected with the negotiations everything that it might have wished. There is something uncomfortable in the report for every party to the negotiations. We need to use the report as part of the structure to take the present process forward. That is what I seek to do in the response that I have made this afternoon, and I am grateful for the support that has already been provided for that.

As my right hon. Friend said, that raises difficult questions also for the paramilitaries—Sinn Fein-IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries. If they are committed to democracy, they must make it perfectly clear why they will not start to decommission. They must make it clear whether they accept that there is no equivalence between illegal paramilitary arms and the arms of the security forces, as they previously said. They must also make it clear whether they accept the principles on democracy set out in the Mitchell report as well as other matters. They must accept not just the principles of democracy but, as the Mitchell report makes clear, the honouring of the principles of democracy.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): May I agree with the Prime Minister's comment that we are dealing with the lives of innocent men, women and children in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that it would be utterly irresponsible for any party to play politics with the lives of those people? It would be particularly irresponsible for a Government to try to buy votes to keep themselves in power. Does he also agree that the commission recommends no form of election? It made it clear that that proposal was outside its remit, and that it was making no recommendation, but simply reporting what was said to it.

May I take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to the commission for the intensity and urgency with which it has perceived its objectives? Although its members come from three different countries, it has spent Christmas and the new year urgently dealing with its track. I invite the Prime Minister to read paragraph 18, which points out that similar urgency is needed on the political track. Will he accept that advice and now fix a date for all-party talks, rather than waste time as he has for the past 17 months? [Hon. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful." I live with it—you don't!]

May I make it clear that my party fully and unequivocally supports the six principles in the document, which call for total commitment from all parties to the

democratic and peaceful process, and to the total renunciation and rejection of violence? Does the Prime Minister feel that, if all parties committed themselves to those six principles, he could fix a date for all-party talks?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that there cannot be all-party talks unless there is confidence that encourages all parties to attend those talks. There is no point in the hon. Gentleman saying, "Let us have all-party talks," when he knows that, without confidence, neither the communities nor the political parties in Northern Ireland would be able to come to such talks.

The hon. Gentleman has for many years played a leading role in Northern Ireland in trying to bring people together and trying to ensure that we move towards peace. It would be a tragedy of enormous proportions if he himself put a barrier across our progress towards peace in Northern Ireland at this stage.

The hon. Gentleman talked about buying votes in this House. If I had been concerned about short-term electoral matters on this issue, I probably would not have embarked upon the process in the first place. From the outset of the process, I have made it clear—and, from time to time, I have taken risks in order to demonstrate—that what I care about is trying to prevent the killing, the bloodshed, the hatred, the abuse and the sheer nastiness that has dominated too much of the lives of British citizens in Northern Ireland for far too many years.

I am prepared to take risks for that, but I am not prepared to buy votes for it. I will stand upon the principles upon which I have stood since the beginning of the process, and I do not intend to be shaken free of them by the hon. Gentleman's remarks or by any other circumstance. What matters to me is carrying the process forward.

The hon. Gentleman has been engaged in the battle for peace in Northern Ireland for longer than I have—I acknowledge that—but I care about it as much as he does, and I am engaged in it as much as he is. I am approaching the matter, as I hope the hon. Gentleman is, with good will, and my prime concern is that we move the process forward. We must not allow old hatreds, old enmities and old stupidities to prevent the progress from now until we secure peace.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I welcome the statement by the Prime Minister, and the sensible remarks from the Leader of the official Opposition. The Mitchell commission recognises that it would be impossible for those who believe that decommissioning should take place first to have any confidence unless the six principles outlined are not only accepted by the paramilitary organisations, but honoured. As one of those principles—the total decommissioning of their weaponry, cannot the honouring take place only after decommissioning has occurred? That being the case, the Prime Minister is right to recognise that the only real way forward is through an election.

May I state unequivocally that, while I might have liked some further principles to be added to the six that the senator and his team have laid down, I can give my support to those six? I will work with the Prime Minister in

efforts to bring about an election, so that the people of Northern Ireland can put forward their negotiators in an attempt to get a real and structured peace in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has to say. I agree with the analysis of why the route forward is the democratic route, and we must bring into play the views of the majority of people in all communities, who I believe wish to see the process continued. I see no route other than the one I have outlined, unless decommissioning takes place prior to talks, which, of course, would remove the need for an elective route.

The paramilitaries may be intransigent or unwilling to begin decommissioning, which—I remind the House—is what is asked for. No one has asked for the total decommissioning of all weapons before talks begin. We have told Sinn Féin and the loyalist paramilitaries, in order to provide confidence for the people of Northern Ireland and the political parties and their representatives in Northern Ireland, "Show your determination to seek peace by beginning to decommission."

We have said not that they should totally decommission, but that they should begin to decommission before we get into talks and negotiations. In the absence of that, I see no route available at present—unless a fresh one, as yet unknown, is suggested—other than the process I have set out before the House.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I warmly welcome the commission report from Senator Mitchell. It was a very tough job, but it has been done thoroughly and deserves support. I warmly welcome the fact that the Government have been able to provide such a welcome for it as well. Frankly, that cannot have been easy, because the report did not fulfil all that the Government had wished for. I am sure that the Prime Minister is right to welcome it. I was also extremely pleased to hear the welcome that the report has received across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland. That has shown—we have heard some of it today—some considerable statesmanship.

The Prime Minister should be clear—I do not need to stress it too much to him—that the Liberal Democrats take the view that those who have terrorised Northern Ireland through the bomb and the gun, on all sides, in the past 25 years need to show a concrete example of why they are now moving to democracy. It remains our view that the best way to do that would be through the decommissioning of weapons. It has for some time been argued that, should that not prove possible, approaching the process through an elected convention is a right and proper alternative route to take. We have proposed that to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on previous occasions.

Nevertheless, I am sure that the Prime Minister would agree with me—we have heard some evidence of it today—that that idea produces peculiar and legitimate sensitivities on the part of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, for whom words like "assembly" have chilling and unacceptable reverberations of failure in the past. Matters such as the size of such a body, its remit, its nature and its time limitation, are absolutely vital. We will submit some thoughts on that to the Prime Minister in the near future.

I should like to touch briefly on one other matter relating to confidence-building measures. In December, when I was in Dublin to see the Taoiseach, I proposed to him that there might be case for a limited cross-Ireland amnesty for the surrender of Semtex. I understand that much is held, and that many of those in possession of it would like a chance to get rid of it.

Semtex is unique, because it is a purely aggressive weapon, with no defensive purposes and no forensic history. Does the Prime Minister believe that, as part of the confidence-building measures, such an offer, made by both Governments and unconnected with the peace process, could nevertheless contribute greatly to building confidence around that process in the future?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support, and for his kind words about Senator Mitchell and his colleagues. I am pleased that he concurs with our view—one that I know he has expressed—that, first, the right approach would have been decommissioning by those who hold weapons, but, in the absence of that, the right way to proceed is the way that we have proposed.

As the right hon. Gentleman has said, the details of the election and the body are crucial. Those will need to be discussed with the parties, and we will wish to remove sensitivities wherever we can. I will, of course, be pleased to receive any representations from the right hon. Gentleman, the official Opposition or any other colleagues in the House.

On the question of an amnesty, our aim is to take terrorist weapons out of circulation. That is what matters. There could not, of course, be an amnesty for the murders and violence of the past.

Mr. Ashdown indicated assent.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman did not suggest that, but I am making that point so that there is no misunderstanding that that could be on offer at any stage. The issues raised in the right hon. Gentleman's earlier comments will be among those that we will have to consider and examine.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): Will my right hon. Friend accept that, in contrast to the remarks of hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), on the Conservative Benches and further afield there is widespread and the strongest possible support for the statement that he has made, and for his entire handling of the peace process?

Will my right hon. Friend comment on the proposition that what we are seeking by various means, one of which may be an elective process and decommissioning in parallel, from IRA-Sinn Féin and others is an irrefutable and irrevocable demonstration that they are committed exclusively to peaceful means? Does he also agree that we are seeking evidence that they accept the principle of consent, which means acknowledging that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and will remain so as long as that is the wish of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. Indeed, the House will have been familiar with the specific formulation that he used. I am grateful

[The Prime Minister]

for his support for the line that we have proposed to take. I know that my hon. Friend has taken a great interest in Northern Ireland, and is a frequent visitor to Northern Ireland. I think that his support for this approach is warmly welcomed.

Mr. Clive Soley (Hammersmith): If the Prime Minister is obliged to go down the route of an elected assembly because the paramilitary groups are not prepared to surrender weapons, he will know from what has already been said that there is acute concern, especially among the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, that any assembly should not represent a return to some of the structures that have failed in the past. His problem is to carry with him the elected republican parties in Northern Ireland. What guarantees did he give them and other people that their fears about the past will not come true in future?

The Prime Minister: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. When I made my statement to the House some time ago, I acknowledged that not every party in Northern Ireland had advocated this approach, that there would be some sensitivities about it, and that we would seek to see what could be done to meet those sensitivities.

I have made the point consistently that, if we are to achieve peace successfully in Northern Ireland, we are going to have to achieve consent across the political divide in Northern Ireland. That has been our approach from the outset, and it remains our approach. Of course, we will try to take on board the sensitivities that people have as we take this matter forward.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Does my right hon. Friend join me in deploring yesterday's selective leaking and briefing by the Dublin Government and the Irish ambassador, and agree that, while remaining opposed to all-party talks before decommissioning, it would be utterly irresponsible simply to reject the report? Does he accept that this Tory at least is prepared to consider elections in Northern Ireland, because he believes it to be right, not because it might buy support? I find it deeply offensive for people to suggest that elections might be such a tactic. This issue is far, far too important to play gutter politics with.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I share his view about the selective leaking of the Mitchell report, and, indeed, the selective leaking of any report on any occasion. It does, sadly, happen from time to time. Many people's lives would be easier were that not to be the case.

Mr. Ashdown indicated assent. [Laughter.]

The Prime Minister: One does not have to be in government to realise that leaking, whether total or selective, can sometimes be difficult.

I know my hon. Friend's strong feelings about Northern Ireland, but it would not have been at all responsible to reject this report because there are things in it that do not accord wholly with the previous position of the

Government. I think that what we are doing is accepting, as every party to these negotiations has to accept, that, within the Mitchell report, there is something that each and every party will like and something that each and every party will not like.

But what we must not do is get ourselves in the position that we have so often been in in Northern Ireland, in which, because there is something one party does not like, it brings the whole process to a juddering halt. I am prepared to operate within the principles we have set out with a degree of pragmatism in order to reach the conclusion that this House wishes to see reached, and I believe that will be the view of most hon. Members.

On the other point made by my hon. Friend, I think perhaps I could do no better than to quote from paragraph 56 of the Mitchell report:

"Elections held in accordance with democratic principles express and reflect the popular will".

That is entirely true. That is how all of us arrived here in this House.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the Prime Minister agree that, while all welcome his statement on the commission's report, and while paragraph 20 sets out the six principles, with which the whole House agrees, it omits to mention the principle of consent that governs all democratic proceedings? Does he accept that the principle of consent would have to govern not only any agreement that may emerge from any substantive negotiations but also the possibility of disagreement or failure to arrive at an agreement?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right about the consent principle. The report makes it clear that all the parties should accept democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving issues, and should agree to abide by the terms of any agreement. As I said earlier—I suspect that the hon. Gentleman may share my view—it would be a significant additional step if Sinn Féin were to join the two Governments and the other parties in supporting the principle of consent in the Downing street declaration.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Eltham): I do not need to remind my right hon. Friend that among the more than 3,000 who have lost their lives in the past 25 years are Ian Gow, Anthony Berry, Robert Bradford and Airey Neave. Is it not a proper memorial to them and to all the others that we should go beyond bipartisanship to non-partisanship, that every party that takes part in the process, which we hope we will be able to start, should try to overcome any past obstacles, and that those parties should talk, not only to the Mitchell group, but to each other? That requires each of them to create the conditions under which the others will come.

The Prime Minister: All the former Members of the House mentioned by my hon. Friend were democrats, think that all of them, were they here today, would have been urging us to take a risk for peace. In my judgment all the people who have suffered in Northern Ireland over the past 25 years, were they able to be here today—either side of the House—would be saying the same thing: peace is worth a risk—take it.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull, North): congratulate the Prime Minister on his good fortune in having a tangential advantage in the statement announced today—that of keeping his Government in power.

Will he inform the House whether the Taoiseach has agreed with the Government's proposed course of action? I am not suggesting that he can veto anything that the right hon. Gentleman does, but has he agreed with the proposal? Does the principle of consent, as outlined in the Downing street declaration and the framework document—which we all support—amount only to British sovereignty over Northern Ireland, not to the imposition of any arrangements that do not have the support of a majority in both communities?

The Prime Minister: The principle of consent relates to the agreement, and that is set out clearly in the documents before us. I do not propose to respond to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's statement. It is unworthy; I have responded to it once this afternoon, and see no purpose in responding to it again. I spoke to the Taoiseach last evening; he was well aware of what I was going to say, and we both look forward to meeting and to discussing the subject at a forthcoming summit.

Mr. Hugh Dykes (Harrow, East): Not only is the report a tribute to the people who created and wrote it, but it is the culmination of the long-standing forbearance, patience and courage of both my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who have liaised with the senior Irish Ministers involved.

As a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for his earlier forthright mention of the fact that any delicate election process or system that is to be constructed, in whatever way it may emerge—in itself a difficult matter—would not be a return to the old Stormont paralysis or the Ulster assembly system, which was, I vividly and painfully remember, sabotaged by Protestant militants two decades ago.

The Prime Minister: It is certainly not a return to the past; I see it as a step to the future. I think that that is how it has been viewed by all those who have examined the proposition over recent months and put their name to it.

Mr. Thomas McAvoy (Glasgow, Rutherglen): I wish to associate myself with the gratitude expressed to Senator Mitchell and his team for their work, and with the tributes to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for their responsible attitude to that issue.

The Prime Minister must know, however, that, when one adopts an idea that has emanated from one side or the other in Northern Ireland, suspicion is immediately aroused on the other side, as has happened in connection with more than one issue in Northern Ireland of late. Bearing that in mind, to keep the SDLP and the other parties on board, will he listen carefully to their representations about the nature and modality of the proposed assembly, and about the possibility of a time scale for its existence?

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is yes. I think I may say that, in the past three or four years, I have gone to enormous pains, as have my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, to try to ensure that we can remove misunderstandings, and that we can take on board the views and sensitivities of all the parties. I have made that point clear repeatedly.

I am as well aware as any hon. Member that we need to carry people with us—all the people with us, if we can—if we are to achieve a satisfactory outcome to the negotiations that we are embarked on. That has been our position in the past, and it remains our position today.

Mr. Graham Riddick (Colne Valley): Although the Mitchell Commission says that decommissioning would take place "during the process" of all-party negotiations, it does not say how those negotiations and decommissioning would interact. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that we will never allow a position in which Sinn Fein-IRA are allowed to take part in negotiations if there is even the vaguest implicit threat that violence may be resumed if they do not get what they want?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Perhaps I may refer him especially to paragraph 34 of the Mitchell report, which says:

"The parties should consider an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all-party negotiations, rather than before or after as the parties now urge. Such an approach represents a compromise. If the peace process is to move forward, the current impasse must be overcome."

That is precisely the way I see it.

Obviously, at the beginning of such talks, I would suspect that the parties themselves will wish to erect a series of staging posts, but it is not for me at this stage to set out precisely what they would do or how they would agree it. I believe that they would wish to discuss that matter at the beginning of their talks. I think Senator Mitchell envisages that that is what they would do, and so do I.

Miss Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the statement by the Leader of the Opposition. I say to the Prime Minister that I personally do not believe that either the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition would be prepared to play politics with the lives of the people of Northern Ireland.

I repudiate the insinuations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston-upon-Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), and I wish to dissociate myself from those remarks.

Can the Prime Minister tell me any possible reason why, if the proposals for an elected body were taken up—as they might be—any democratic party that believes in democracy would refuse to get involved in an election for that body with a very narrow mandate?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she said, which I deeply appreciate.

As to the second part of her question, I can give the hon. Lady no good reason why any democratic party would refuse to take part in an election for the narrow purposes set out in my statement today. I cannot conceive that there is a credible reason for refusing to take part in that, and I very much hope that no one will.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his outstanding commitment to a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. It was his initiative, he has driven it, and it should not be overlooked. As a Conservative and committed Unionist, I also congratulate the official Unionist party, its leader and his predecessor on their enlightened and constructive attitude to the peace process.

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

Paragraph 19 of the report says:

"there must be commitment and adherence to fundamental principles of democracy and non-violence."

Because confidence is so important, can my right hon. Friend tell the House this afternoon that it is his belief that Sinn Fein-IRA are prepared to accept those fundamentals, which they have never done in their history?

The Prime Minister: We wait to hear from them. The statement that they have produced so far has not covered that point. Clearly, we wish to hear from them and from the loyalist paramilitaries—from both sides—precisely whether they accept those principles and that commitment. We hope that they will accept them, and that they will state that unequivocally. I look forward to hearing them say so. They now have the opportunity to argue the case and to say directly, on television and on radio, that they accept those principles. I hope that they will use the opportunities that are open to them.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Does the Prime Minister accept that the Mitchell report does not recommend immediate elections, but recommends a compromise between those who demand decommissioning before all-party talks and those who maintain that decommissioning can take place only at the conclusion of all-party talks? Will the Prime Minister accept a staged process of decommissioning in parallel with immediate all-party talks, with elections to be held on a new constitutional settlement after the all-party talks agree to such a settlement?

The Prime Minister: We must get all the parties to the table in order to have all-party talks. To do that, we need the confidence of the people and all the parties of Northern Ireland. That is the ingredient that is missing from the hon. Gentleman's proposition. That is why we are seeking an electoral position that will enable all parties to have that confidence and to have a direct mandate to enter into talks. The election is the mechanism that will allow that to occur. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand why we have proposed it, and what it will achieve.

Mr. Richard Spring (Bury St. Edmunds): My right hon. Friend has spoken about the need to boost confidence in order to develop the political processes in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that a significant step toward improved confidence in Northern Ireland would be the immediate cessation of killings and punishment beatings?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly agree with that. My hon. Friend has some direct experience of Northern Ireland, and I am grateful for his support. He is entirely correct. If that were to happen, it would certainly increase the feeling of confidence across the communities in Northern Ireland, and, as such, would be a very welcome development.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is the Prime Minister aware that many people who hoped that the ceasefire would lead to early all-party talks have been strengthened in that view by the peace process in South Africa, the

agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and the Dayton accord—not one of which required the decommissioning of weapons? In the latter case, President Clinton said that the arms embargo could be lifted a few weeks after the Dayton accord was agreed.

Is the Prime Minister aware that the process began when my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), Mr. Adams and Albert Reynolds advanced a proposition to end the fighting based on the idea that the people on the island of Ireland—north and south and in the two communities—should be able to determine their own future? If there is a newly elected body and a referendum in the north that underlines the division of Ireland, it is no more likely that peace will be secured now—whatever the parties' intentions—than in the past hundreds of years.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman were to look more carefully, he would see that the report refers to "north and south respectively". The right hon. Gentleman ran them together, and referred to the "north and south", which gives a rather different impression of the view at that stage. Northern Ireland is already a practising democracy, and therefore is different from some of the examples that the right hon. Gentleman gave.

The underlying point remains the same. We have sought to gain the confidence of both communities from the outset. If we do not obtain their confidence, we cannot carry the process through to a conclusion. That point cannot be ducked if we are to reach a settlement.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his approach and achievements to date? Could he confirm that there are two alternative approaches to all-party talks: one is through the acceptance by the parties of the six principles, and therefore confidence-building measures; and the other is through the election? Does the election require that the people standing for election should adopt the six principles first?

The Prime Minister: No, the two routes are not quite as my hon. Friend set out. The first way to obtain the confidence that would lead to all-party talks would be some prior decommissioning by the paramilitary bodies. On that basis, I think that all parties would come together and talk without an election.

The second way would be the elective basis that I set out this afternoon. If that is to be successful, we would hope and expect all parties to declare their support for the six principles. Those are the two options—either some prior decommissioning, or, through the process of an elective body, to determine who would take part in the negotiations.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Does the Prime Minister accept that, like the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), all right hon. and hon. Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches live in Northern Ireland? They have suffered as well, and they speak for a large section of the community that has been severely hit by terrorism for 25 years. We are equally anxious to ensure that peace prevails in the long term in Northern Ireland.

Does the Prime Minister recognise that, although we accept the six principles in the report, we do not agree with other elements in it? We welcome

Prime Minister's statement to the House, and we emphasise that we welcome also the thoughtful response by the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition.

As to the forthcoming election in Northern Ireland, will the Prime Minister correct the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. Dykes), who does not understand the difference between an assembly and an elected body? If that hon. Gentleman is in the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, he ought to know the difference.

Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that we are talking not about an assembly but about an elected body, having no legislative or administrative powers in Northern Ireland? Can the Prime Minister tell the House that, in co-operation with Her Majesty's Opposition and other parties, he will expedite the election to ensure that it does not coincide with other possible elections—for example, a general election in the Republic of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to have the right hon. Gentleman's support. The whole House knows of the time when the right hon. Gentleman was badly wounded as the result of an incident in Northern Ireland, and of the courage that he has shown in his career in politics since then. Many Northern Ireland politicians on both sides of the divide have shown great courage. I draw no distinction in the difficult circumstances of politics in Northern Ireland. I hope that those politicians will show the same moral courage to move forward as they have shown physical and moral courage in the past.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman cannot agree with every point in the Mitchell report. I dare say that no one does. Over time, it may turn out that one of the report's greatest strengths is that everyone will find something in it with which he can agree, and something with which he is not quite so happy to agree.

As to the proposed elections, the right hon. Gentleman is concerned that they would establish a body that had no legislative or administrative powers. I hope that it will be of assurance to everyone across Northern Ireland that it is a mechanism for getting into all-party talks and finding a proper solution, following which I hope that we can ensure that politicians in Northern Ireland are able to take a greater share of responsibility than they have been able to do in the past.

Rev. William McCrea (Mid-Ulster): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that real, genuine and lasting peace is a rich prize for the people of Northern Ireland—and something that they do not want in any way to see thrown away.

I am sure that the Prime Minister recollects that two years ago, in 1993, the leader of my party, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) and myself presented a document proposing a constitutional convention for Northern Ireland. Bearing in mind that at least 70 per cent. of all the people right across the community in Northern Ireland support such a body, surely the matter should be moved upon with utmost urgency. Surely no one in a democracy should be afraid of the will of the ballot box.

The Prime Minister: I am extremely grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. I recall the proposals for a constitutional convention that the hon. Member for North

Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) and his hon. Friends presented to me some time ago. I have not yet mentioned Mr. Alderdice of the Alliance party, who has also played a constructive role. I hope that, as a result of all those proposals, we will be able to move forward.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): May I assure the Prime Minister that we fully support the six principles, unequivocally and without any reservations? I also wish to point out that people should read the fifth principle—paragraph 20(e) as it is in the document—carefully before they start talking about the absence of the principle of consent from the document.

I wish to refer the Prime Minister to a section of the document that he mentioned earlier—paragraph 34 of Senator Mitchell's report. That paragraph recommends that all parties, including the Governments not "might", not "may", but "should" follow a course of action in terms of decommissioning as part of the talks process.

Is not the reality of the situation that the Prime Minister and the Government are actually rejecting that core element of Senator Mitchell's report, and that, not only on that but on all the key political elements of the report and the recommendations, the Prime Minister is at odds with Senator Mitchell, his commission, and the Irish Government? Is not the Prime Minister creating a situation in which the consensus that will be required in any democratic experiment simply will not be there, because he is at odds with those with whom he should be working closely on the central, fundamental elements?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have worked very closely with him and his hon. Friends over the past three years, and I look forward to doing so in future.

On the specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised, if he considers paragraph 20(e)—or principle five, whatever one wishes to call it—he will see that at best it means limited consent, not full consent, in the terms of the documentation that we have seen in the past. Limited consent I concede: full consent I emphatically do not concede. That is most certainly not the case.

I have two points to make to the hon. Gentleman about paragraph 34, and both are accurate and pragmatic. First, paragraph 34 is not a recommendation, and is not put forward as a recommendation. Secondly, it does not get everyone to the table. We have to get everyone to the table in order to advance, and that is the purpose.

The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) mentioned the elections. The purpose of those elections is not to produce some body that would return to the concerns that the nationalist community has had in the past. The purpose is to enable a process to take place so that people can be elected to a body that does not have legislative powers, and to ensure that there is a democratic mandate for negotiations, and everybody can sit down together.

The hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) has been as passionate as any Member of the House over the years about getting everybody to sit down together and discuss the future. All I would say to him is that here is a way of achieving that, and he should not turn away from it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Speaker: Order. We are now going to move on.