Northern Ireland (Political Talks)

Mr. Speaker: Before the Secretary of State starts, may I ask hon. Members who are not remaining for this important statement to leave quietly and without conversation?

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Brooke): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a statement about political development in Northern Ireland.

I am pleased to be able to inform the House that, following extensive discussions with the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland—the Alliance party of Northern Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Ulster Democratic Unionist party and the Ulster Unionist party—and with the Irish Government, a basis for formal political talks now exists. I frankly acknowledge to the House that this would not have been possible without the good will and determination of the Northern Ireland parties and the helpful and constructive approach taken by the Irish Government. The stated positions of all these parties are well known. Her Majesty's Government reaffirms their position that Northern Ireland's present status as a part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people.

The endeavour on which we have all agreed to embark is an ambitious one. We are setting out to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and betweeen the peoples of these islands. While a successful outcome cannot be guaranteed in advance, I am confident that all the potential participants are committed to a forward-looking and constructive approach. For their part, the two signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement—the British and Irish Governments—have made it clear that they would be prepared to consider a new and more broadly based agreement or structure if such an agreement can be arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all the parties concerned.

To allow an opportunity for such a wider political dialogue, the two Governments have agreed not to hold a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference between two pre-specified dates. All the parties concerned will make use of this interval for intensive discussions to seek the new and more broadly based agreement which I have just described.

As the conference will not be meeting between the specified dates the Secretariat at Maryfield will accordingly not be required for that period to discharge its normal role of servicing conference meetings provided for in article 3 of the Agreement.

It is accepted that discussions must focus on three main relationships: those within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institutions there and the Westminster Parliament; among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the two Governments. It is common ground between all the parties that hope of achieving a new and more broadly based agreement rests on finding a way to give adequate expression to the totality of the relationships I have mentioned.

Talks will accordingly take place in three strands corresponding respectively to the three relationships. Some arrangements will be needed for liaison between the different strands of these complex discussions. All the Northern Ireland parties will participate actively and directly in the north-south discussions. The Unionist parties have made it clear that they wish their participation in those talks to be formally associated with my presence and that they will regard themselves as members of the United Kingdom team. It is accepted by all those involved that, to make full use of the interval between meetings of the conference to achieve an overall agreement satisfactory to all, it will be necessary to have launched all three sets of discussions within weeks of each other.

A first step towards getting related discussions under way in all three strands will be the opening, as soon as possible, of substantive talks between the parties in Northern Ireland under my chairmanship. These will commence with a round of bilateral meetings before moving on, as soon as possible, into plenary sessions. It has been agreed by all the participants that before long, when, after consultation, I judge that an appropriate point has been reached, I will propose formally that the other two strands should be launched. My judgment as to timing will be governed by the fact that all involved have agreed that the three sets of discussions will be under way within weeks of each other.

The internal talks, like the talks in the other strands, will follow a demanding and intensive schedule. In order to ensure a full airing of the issues, it will be open to each of the parties to raise any aspect of these relationships, including constitutional issues, or any other matter which it considers relevant. All concerned have assured me that they will participate in good faith and will make every effort to achieve progress.

It is accepted by all the parties that nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole and that confidentiality will be maintained thereunto. However, in the final analysis, the outcome will need to be acceptable to the people.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull, North): In thanking the right hon. Gentleman for his statement, may I take the opportunity to congratulate him on his determination and tenacity, which have been vital in securing the agreement that he has just announced? We are also grateful for the imagination and flexibility displayed by the political parties in Northern Ireland and by the Irish Government. We hope very much that those qualities will still be on display throughout the substantive negotiations which are about to begin.

Today's statement is only the beginning of a process that we all desire will lead to an agreement that will be acceptable throughout the island of Ireland. We are at an historic moment. There is now a window of opportunity, when possibilities for a political settlement are open in a way that has not been possible for decades. We know that all the participants recognise their responsibility because they would not otherwise have come so far. They carry on their shoulders the hopes and wishes of all sections of the people of Ireland, north and south, and of this island. The people will not lightly forgive their elected representatives if, over the next few weeks, they do not live up to the spirit and letter of the statement that has been agreed today. We have confidence that they will.

The Opposition fully support the participants in their endeavours to bring about a lasting agreement which will resolve the dissensions between Unionists and nationalists.

between the two parts of Ireland and between Britain and Ireland. Again, the right hon. Gentleman deserves the thanks of every hon. Member for his statement today.

Mr. Brooke: I thank the hon. Gentleman very warmly for his opening and closing remarks. I join him in paying tribute to those who have participated with me in the conversations so far and I join him in his hopes for the future. He is correct to say that this is a moment of opportunity for us all. I am reassured by the amount of common ground that we have been able to establish in the talks so far and I hope that it will continue. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the support that the Opposition have rendered throughout the process.

Mr. James Molyneaux (Lagan Valley): I thank the Secretary of State for giving us the text of the statement some 12 days ago because it enabled us to study it, and to obtain written clarification and a record of understandings.

May I endorse the statement, which is similar to the draft agreed with us last summer, but which the Secretary of State was not permitted by Mr. Collins to deliver to the House? Does he share my regret that the intervening nine months have been unnecessarily wasted?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that I especially endorse the phrase "confidentiality will be maintained" until the talks have concluded? Does he share my view that those of us who will be expected to play key roles must not jeopardise all that has been achieved so far by negotiating over the air in radio chat shows?

Finally, would the Secretary of State be kind enough to pass on my thanks to the news industry for letting me in on the secret that the statement would be made today and not tomorrow as previously arranged?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he said. In the course of the past nine months, we have been able to secure a greater convergence of all the parties which then made it possible for the statement, which I proposed 12 days ago, to be accepted. I entirely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman said about confidentiality. I would as little expect to meet the right hon. Gentleman on a chat show as I think he would expect to meet me.

As to the date of the statement, all of us were grateful to the participants in the talks that they were able to give us an answer yesterday rather than today. We felt it better that the statement should be made as early as possible.

Mr. Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): Will my right hon. Friend accept my warmest congratulations on his achievements in bringing the parties of both north and south together in what can be the most worthwhile and productive effort since the Sunningdale agreement was abandoned in 1974 by the Labour Government?

My right hon. Friend mentions that one group wants to be considered as part of Her Majesty's Government's team, and may I express the hope that that does not in any way give them the right of veto over what Her Majesty's Government's representatives believe to be right in the interests of all the parties, north and south? Perhaps I might also add in passing that my right hon. Friend's achievement shows that consultation can, at times, be extremely worth while and productive? *[Laughter.]*

Is not the best way in which we can help our right hon. Friend in his endeavours to refrain from attacking any group in Ireland, north or south, if things happen to go wrong? What my right hon. Friend is trying to do is to deal with the problems of the past 400 years. Those of us who have had an active part in that effort in the past know that, despite the best intentions, things can at times go wrong. There is no point in attacking the other side of the House in those circumstances.

Mr. Brooke: I thank my right hon. Friend for his opening remarks.

My right hon. Friend's first question related to one of the groups of participants regarding themselves as what I described as the United Kingdom team rather than the team of Her Majesty's Government. My right hon. Friend is correct to think that Her Majesty's Government would not be prohibited or precluded from any observations of their own by the style in which others would be joining them in the second strand of talks.

To secure widely acceptable arrangements, we are determined that we should maintain unanimity throughout the process in terms of agreement at the various stages. Anyone will have the right to say, at some stage, that they wish to withdraw, but I very much hope that they will not feel the need to do so.

As to consultation, I realise that that is a theme of other events that are occurring elsewhere. Having been through a recent experience of such consultation, all I can say is that I do not recommend 15 months of it.

I agree, of course, with my right hon. Friend that, when dealing with problems whose roots lie in the centuries, it is sensible not to be engaged in criticism of other parties.

Sir David Steel (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): May I join in the tributes that have justifiably been paid to the Secretary of State on his great patience and on his achievement on getting all the horses into the starting gate at the beginning of this necessarily long-drawn-out procedure? It would also be right to express gratitude to the people of Northern Ireland, who have consistently sought a new beginning and pressed their political parties to come to the point now reached.

The right hon. Gentleman will understand that, to those on this Bench, the references to the triangular relationship have a certain portentous historic ring. However, the people throughout Ireland should know that all of us in this House and throughout Britain will pray that their endeavours succeed in bringing peace and tranquility to their attractive land and peoples.

Mr. Brooke: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks and I totally endorse what he said in terms of gratitude to the people of Northern Ireland. When one considers what the people of Northern Ireland have been through in the past 20 years —if one extrapolated the deaths to these islands as a whole, that would represent 100,000 dead—their social cohesiveness has been most remarkable and I pay tribute to it.

Rev. Ian Paisley (Antrim, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman take it from me that successive Secretaries of State have not been over-popular in the Province? However, special tribute needs to be paid to him, and I am sure that all my colleagues in this House would want to endorse that. He dealt with these matters in honesty, uprightness and with great openness and that was appreciated by all concerned. We did not agree with all he

[Rev. Ian Paisley]

said and neither did he agree with all that we said, but we met one another on that basis and I think that the people of Northern Ireland and my colleagues would want me to put that on record here today.

Will the right hon. Gentleman take it from me that the people of Northern Ireland will be greatly relieved that the vast majority of them who voted that talks should take place when three conditions had been met, are glad that those conditions have now been met: first, that we should all seek an alternative to and a replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement; secondly, that the Anglo-Irish Conference should not meet while these negotiations are going on; and thirdly, that the Secretariat as outlined in the agreement will not be needed if the conference is not operating.

Will the right hon. Gentleman also take it from me that the people of Northern Ireland are now relieved that the Government and the House can see the wisdom of what the overwhelming majority of people in the Province voted for? Will he confirm that the statement that he made to the House today—which is most important to the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland—that Northern Ireland will remain an integral part of the United Kingdom as long as its citizens so desire, also confirms what he said in the House on 5 July 1990:

"Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom in national and international law . . . By virtue of its constitution, the Republic of Ireland has, since 1937 also claimed sovereignty over Northern Ireland. We do not accept or recognise that claim, which has no basis in our law or, equally important, in international law."—[*Official Report*, 5 July 1990; Vol. 175, c. 1140.]

Mr. Speaker: Briefly, please.

Rev. Ian Paisley: I beg, Sir, your indulgence. We are discussing a statement which is vital to the people of Northern Ireland. We only have a short time and it is important that that matter be put to the Secretary of State. I know about the difficulties of trying to put questions on a statement.

Does the Secretary of State agree that the gate into the field has been opened, but that there is a lot of hard ploughing in front of us all and that there is no need for people to go on chat shows or public shows in the media to try practice scores? It would be better to get the participants around the table as soon as possible and to get down to the real business before us.

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said and for the openness with which our conversations have been conducted. I pay equal tribute to him for the directness with which he has said a series of things to me. In the spirit of our conversations, I can say that I genuinely enjoyed them. As to the conditions to which he referred having been met, I also want to pay tribute to the contribution made in that element of the process by others besides the Unionist parties to ensure that the wording appropriately met the concerns of all parties.

Of course, I stand by the remarks that I made on 5 July. They are on the record, Finally, in response to the hon. Gentleman's comments about the open gate into the field, and at the risk of mixing the metaphor, I am conscious that the role of sheepdog will have to be continued.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): May I join other hon. Members in welcoming the Secretary of State's statement, which is long overdue? Like others, I express my appreciation of the integrity, dedication and honesty with which he has approached these talks during the past 15 months. Although there have been many obstacles and hiccups along the way, I should also like to pay tribute to the Irish Government and to the leaders of the two Unionist parties. Although there are many difficulties, it is fair to say that all parties approached the talks positively and constructively. I hope that the same spirit is brought to bear on the many obstacles that lie ahead.

I am particularly pleased that all the relationships that are at the heart of the problem are now on the table for discussion, because otherwise we will not solve anything. It is important to note that no agreement can be reached unless agreement is reached on all the conflicting relationships that lie at the heart of the problem. The challenge that faces us is historic and I hope that the spirit that has governed the approach to the talks will continue into the talks themselves.

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said and welcome the spirit in which his party and the Irish Government took part in our conversations. I should like to include my hon. Friend the Minister of State in the kind remarks that have been addressed to me, because he has been engaged in the negotiations and conversations for even longer that I have. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the closing passage of my statement stated:

"It is accepted by all the parties that nothing will be finally agreeed in any strand until everything is agreed in the talks as a whole".

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): My right hon. Friend and his team are to be congratulated on their patience and tenacity during the past 15 months. Does he agree that what we are hopefully about is achieving an end to violence by making that violence increasingly irrelevant? Does he further agree that, in so doing, an awful lot of political sacred cows must be faced up to on both sides—on the one hand, there is the Irish constitution element of this matter and, on the other hand, there must be some acknowledgement of the working and practice of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which I think has done its job admirably?

Mr. Brooke: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, and confirm that, as I said in my statement, the agenda that we shall be addressing will be open and that we shall be able to address those points. Although the central purpose of our talks is the advancement of constitutional democracy in Northern Ireland, and the relationship with the Republic of Ireland, I hope that, in that process, we shall also be exercising pressure on the terrorists.

Mr. Merlyn Rees (Morley and Leeds, South): I welcome the statement. As one of the Secretary of State's predecessors, I believe that the right hon. Gentleman richly deserves the praise that is coming from all quarters. Not the least reason for my welcome is that, unlike Sunningdale and the Convention, the right hon. Gentleman has managed to get all sides of the Unionist political parties together, which has not happened before, and which may be an augur of success when they talk with the SDLP.

I turn now to the three strands of the statement, which referred, I believe, to "within Northern Ireland", "between the people of these islands" and "between the two Governments". I understand one and three, but what does the second mean? What will they be discussing?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks, not least because of the perspective and historical connection that he brings to these affairs. The specific passage in my statement read:

"It is accepted that discussions must focus on three main relationships: those within Northern Ireland, including the relationship between any new institution there and the Westminster Parliament; among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the two Governments."

We shall therefore be looking beyond the first strand at what might be future arrangements between those arrangements that we establish in Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic.

Mr. James Kilfedder (North Down): I also pay tribute to the consummate skill and perseverence of the Secretary of State. Is he aware that there will be a great groundswell of good will—certainly in North Down—about the talks which may lead to reconciliation, stability and progress in Northern Ireland? Does he also agree that there is a need for people in the Irish Republic to visit Northern Ireland, where they will find that the people are not ogres but are hospitable, kindly, generous and friendly?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. He will know as a result of recent research that, of those who live in the Republic of Ireland who have visited Northern Ireland, 98 per cent. have said that they would wish to return. For myself, I hope that we can increase the number who visit for the first time.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I particularly welcome the final sentence in the statement, in which the Secretary of State said that the outcome of any talks would have to be acceptable to the people, unlike the failed Sunningdale initiative, when an attempt was made to ignore the ballot box. Does not the Secretary of State agree that one difficulty that lies ahead is the prospect of an election which would not just interrupt the timetable but might cause problems over matters of substance?

Will it not be difficult to have serious discussions about future democratic institutions for Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom when it is the policy of the alternative Government to manipulate Northern Ireland out of the Kingdom? Would not the best contribution of Her Majesty's Opposition to the process be to make it absolutely clear that they respect, and will entirely respect, the right of the people of Northern Ireland to determine their future?

Mr. Brooke: Of course I recognise that the shadow of a general election casts inself upon these events. It is on the whole unlikely—I choose my words carefully—that a general election might occur during the period of the talks themselves. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] No greater significance should be read into that than that anyone who spends his life in the island of Ireland becomes quite a good betting man in the process.

On the second part of the hon. Gentleman's question, it would be wholly inappropriate for me to make any comment on behalf of the Opposition. For myself, I do not see the fact of the general election potentially interfering with the process on which we are engaged.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): I join other right hon. and hon. Members in paying tribute to the Secretary of State, and I congratulate him on the skill that he has brought to bear on the process. I ask him not to be put off by the North Down Conservatives who indicate that he is wasting his time. Will he have a word for them and for others in the Province who are negative about the process? Does he recognise, as I do, that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland wish the Secretary of State well with the process? They want to see peace and political stability in the Province.

May I ask the right hon. Gentleman a question about the time scale and the time frame in which the talks will take place? In his statement he did not say what length of time would be involved. If the period were to be 10 or 12 weeks, considerable progress could have been made when the time came to an end. Will the Secretary of State build in sufficient flexibility to ensure that whatever progress has been made is not wasted?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks. As to his comments about my party colleagues in North Down, Dr. Kennedy made some remarks yesterday morning and I had a meeting with him yesterday afternoon. I believe—but it is a matter of taste—that it might have been better if those events had taken place in reverse order.

As to the question about timing, I think that the amount of time which we have for the talks will concentrate everybody's mind. I am grateful for the commitment which has been made for them occurring intensively. It has been common ground among us all in the progress that we have made so far that we should conduct ourselves in such a way that we can hold the progress we are making and not run the risk of going backwards.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): Will not the Secretary of State agree that there was never a way of striking through the Gordian knot of conflicting constitutional interests in Northern Ireland and that the only way to proceed was to seek to unravel the knot? The Secretary of State seems to have done that with prudence and patience. Does he agree that the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which is now about five years old, has concentrated the minds of all the parties in Northern Ireland and that one of the most significant statements that he has made is that the Government of the Republic of Ireland and our Government are now prepared to accept a more broadly based agreement? Does he accept that there has been a constitutional crisis at the heart of the difficulties in Northern Ireland since the agreement was signed, but that that crisis is now over and a time of opportunity now exists?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the manner in which his question was framed. All of us who took part in the conversations during the past 15 months realised the nature of the opportunity that was available to us. I have paid tribute before, but I do so again, to the fact that we have been able to converge and people have embraced the view of others in reaching the position that we are in today, which is acceptable to all. I hope that that process will continue when we begin substantive talks.

Several Hon. Members *rose*——

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have to have regard to the subsequent business, before the House, which, as the House knows, is a guillotine motion. We also have a ten-minute Bill. I shall call six more Members—three from each side—and then we shall move on.

Sir Michael McNair-Wilson (Newbury): My right hon. Friend will know that I have long believed that political stability could return to the Province only by creating a measure of self-government there. Therefore, I welcome what he has said today and pay my own tribute to him for his persistence and patience and his long-suffering approach to this difficult problem. However, it seems to me that the first of the three requirements is the most important—namely, to create self-government in the Province. Will my right hon. Friend give plenty of time for that part of his scheme to be achieved, rather than rushing forward or, indeed, putting any pressure on the parties to move forward to the other two strands? May I also——

Mr. Speaker: Briefly, please.

Sir Michael McNair-Wilson: How does my right hon. Friend intend to have public participation in assenting to what may be agreed?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I hope that we shall have sufficient time for all the strands of the talks to be explored. If everyone is to be asked to consider a complete package at the end of the talks, it is only right that the constituent parts should all have been adequately discussed. We all have an open mind about how we would engage in public participation but the concept exists in the statement.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): The Unionists sent the Government a letter in August 1985 suggesting talks between the parties of Northern Ireland, the London Government and the Dublin Government, a suggestion which was promptly rejected by the then Prime Minister without consultation. Since then, an Anglo-Irish Agreement has been imposed and we have had six wasted years. Does the Secretary of State recognise that there is every reason for a general welcome on these Benches for his statement to the House this afternoon?

Is the Secretary of State aware that only two parties in Northern Ireland have expressed opposition to his proposals—Provisional Sinn Fein and the Conservative party? As the Leader of the Conservative party in Northern Ireland has dismissed the Secretary of State's statement as "a meaningless charade", can he say whether the Conservative party in Northern Ireland will be invited to take part in the internal talks that he proposes?

Mr. Brooke: Of course I am conscious of what has happened in Northern Ireland, in not only the past 20 years and the past six years but for a much longer period. It has already been said in the House today that there is a widespread belief that we have a particular opportunity at this time.

As to the views of Dr. Kennedy, the prospective parliamentary candidate in North Down, I had the opportunity of verifying rather more precisely when I saw him yesteday evening what he had meant by his earlier remarks.

Mr. Barry Porter (Wirral, South): May I add my modest congratulations to the Secretary of State on what he has done? In his statement, he rightly reiterated the concern and right of the northern Irish people to remain in the United Kingdom for as long as they wish to do so. But there was an apparent contradiction, although I accept that I may have got it wrong.

My right hon. Friend said that constitutional issues could be raised at any time during the talks. I hope and trust that that means constitutional issues within the framework of the United Kingdom and of the Province. Perhaps he will confirm that. Will he also confirm that, in his view, a jolly good practice for the conversations and negotiations would be for the two Unionist seats on the Anglo-Irish parliamentary tier now to be taken up?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. It is not for me to provide a trailer of the subjects that might be raised by individual parties in the process, but a number of people have mentioned to me confidentially issues that they would wish to raise, and others have said that they are expecting to need to listen during the course of the conversations to observations on just those subjects. I said in my statement that those might range fairly widely, and I think that it will not be a single party that will be bringing contentious issues to the table.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is a world of difference between agreeing to talk as we have done and talking to agree, as we are about to do? Does he accept that no one should underestimate the difficulties that face all the parties in the negotiations, difficulties that have plagued us for so long? Does he further agree that it is absolutely essential that the political process can and does deliver and that it is clearly seen by all that the only way to tackle intractable problems is through dialogue and negotiations —in other words, through the democratic political process?

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said and especially for what he said in his concluding remarks. I do not think that any of us who have been engaged in the conversations so far and who will be engaged in the talks underestimate for a moment the difficulties that we shall have. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make it clear that the democratic way is the way to resolve these matters.

Mr. James Couchman (Gillingham): It would be otiose of me to add to the plaudits that have come to my right hon. Friend for his statement. Apart from the caveat that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the United Kingdom for so long as the majority desire it, may I ask him whether any other areas are out of bounds? Can he say more about the terms of reference of the discussions?

Mr. Brooke: I do not think it would be helpful of me to do that, not least because we have not yet had the opportunity—and will not have until the talks start—to get into the bilateral talks with the individual Northern Ireland parties. But I made it clear in my statement that the opportunity to raise matters that people felt were relevant went widely. As I said, more than one party has indicated that there are particular subjects that they would wish to bring to the discussions.

Mr. A. E. P. Duffy (Sheffield, Attercliffe): In complimenting the Secretary of State on his patience and resourcefulness, may I also pay tribute to all the parties who are coming to the talks? Does the right hon.

Gentleman agree that some of them will now have to work hard in their constituencies because, as the talks move from the first to the second strand, certain issues, notably power sharing and the Irish dimension, are certain to appear on the agenda, and if they do not appear in the final outcome, that will probably strike a majority of the Members of this House as exceedingly strange?

Mr. Brooke: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who, by their contributions, have got us this far—and I do not want to exaggerate the scale of the progress that we have made.

From the conversations that we have had so far, I think that all parties are conscious of the constituencies and electorates that stand behind them. They all have essential interests about which they have been concerned in framing the basis for those talks. That benefits the process because, as parliamentarians and democrats, we understand the problems and positions of other people who are taking part in the talks. The convergence that has enabled today's statement to be made has been assisted by the willingness of different parties to contribute to helping others who are taking part.

Young Persons (Alcohol Abuse) Etc.

4.10 pm

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make illegal: the consumption of alcohol by young presons under the age of 18 years, and the permitting of such consumption; to empower local authorities to prohibit consumption of alcohol in designated areas; and for connected purposes.

This is the third Bill that I have presented to Parliament seeking to solve the serious social problems caused by alcohol abuse, especially among young children. For too long, society and Parliament have ignored the problem. My previous Bill sought to restrict the sale of alcohol to young persons in supermarkets and off-sale outlets. I managed to get the Bill through all its stages in the House but, unfortunately, it ran out of time in another place, where a few Lords and Baronesses chose to kill it for reasons better known to themselves and to the retail consortium that lobbied them to do so.

Clydesdale is one of the largest constituencies in the United Kingdom. It is a good example of "big is beautiful". Thirty miles of the River Clyde run through it, and we have scenery that would rival any part of the world. However, we also have a blight, which affects not only Clydesdale but can be found in any part of the United Kingdom. It concerns young children—often victims of alcohol abuse—walking our streets and falling victim to alcoholism. Inevitably, they fall into criminality which can, all too often, easily include drug abuse.

I first became aware of the problem through my surgery work when an elderly woman came to see me and said that she was frightened to go out of her home after 6 pm. Gangs of drunken youths were terrorising her little housing estate, and pensioners were prisoners in their own homes. I then researched the problem of alcohol abuse, particularly the under-age problem, and was alarmed by my findings.

First, let me explain what I mean by under-age drinking. I am not just talking about the sly pint of beer or half-pint of lager that is drunk in the back room of a pub or disco by 16 and 17-year-olds. Rather, I am talking about the 12 to 13-year-old girls and boys who become hooked on hard booze and stalk the streets at night getting involved in petty social misbehaviour and progressing to serious alcohol-dependent problems that inevitably lead to serious crimes.

A constituent came to see me, breaking her heart about her 16-year-old son who was a high achiever at school and was set for university. He became trapped in a web of alcohol abuse, dropped out of school and got into trouble with the police. He now faces the serious consequences of missing out on his education, and the legacy of a criminal record—a life wasted, all because of alcohol abuse at a young and tender age.

Throughout the past week, the head teacher of Harelees primary school in my constituency has been phoning and writing to me, and the chairman of the school board has been seeking my help, because the school has been vandalised and has been the subject of arson attacks. Everyone knows that those acts were probably carried out by kids under the influence of alcohol. When I am asked what the police are doing about the problem, regrettably I have to say, "Not enough"—or, in the phrase of the magician Paul Daniels, "Not a lot."