

## Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations)

11.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move,

That the draft Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Revival of Section 3) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 15th May, be approved.

Before I move on to the substance of my comments, I welcome to his place the current, temporary Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland. In the previous Parliament, we maintained a bipartisan approach to policy on Northern Ireland, and I hope very much that we shall be able to do so again in this Parliament. I look forward to any views that he might express on this subject.

As well as welcoming the many new hon. Members, I particularly welcome those from Northern Ireland—the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson), who replaces the much missed Sir James Molyneaux, from whom, fortunately, we shall be able to hear in future in the House of Lords, and the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson). We look forward very much to working with them both.

Meanwhile, the House will be a different place without the presence of Rev. William McCrea. Dr. Joe Hendron will also be missed. I know that he has left many friends in the House. It is also right that I pay tribute to one other absent face, that of Sir Patrick Mayhew, who will also be found in the other place. He worked with a dedication that would have brought many others close to exhaustion for the interests of Northern Ireland as he saw them, and he did so without any hope of personal advantage, knowing that the position of Secretary of State was likely to be his last in government. I believe that Northern Ireland owes him a debt. It was under his stewardship that the Downing street declaration and the framework document were agreed, two milestones on the path to where we are today.

We are reviving the forum now because the talks, which are the centrepiece of the process, are to reopen tomorrow. So let me first consider the process as a whole.

The talks first met last June. The forum followed several days later. High hopes rode on the process. Had Northern Ireland really turned a corner? For some, the answer was no, and had been since the IRA ceasefire tragically and cruelly ended in February last year. That view was compounded just a few days after the talks started, when the IRA planted a bomb that devastated the centre of Manchester. However, to many people in Northern Ireland, the talks nevertheless held out great promise.

The participants in the talks worked hard, and they have achievements to their credit, such as the rules of procedure, and a measure of agreement—formal and informal—on agendas. However, they did not progress into the negotiations on the three strands covering relationships within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and between Westminster and Dublin, because they failed to agree on the issue of decommissioning, although in that case, too, a measure of agreement was reached on important mechanisms that would be needed. The imminence of the elections here was an increasing drag on the ability of the talks to function, and eventually the conclusion was reached that nothing further could be achieved in advance of the elections.

Now that the elections are out of the way, it is vital that we make the greatest effort to move the political process forward. The whole Government, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently set out so clearly and comprehensively, are determined to bring new impetus and new energy into the process. We want to see the talks move forward to consider all the key issues that are important to people in Northern Ireland. We have no illusions that that will be a simple matter, and we do not have any delusions of possessing any wisdom, superior or otherwise, about how to deal with those issues, but I can assure the House that we shall work hard with the people of Northern Ireland to find a way through.

The present talks offer a great opportunity for Northern Ireland, and that will not last indefinitely. Early progress is needed, which means addressing the issue of decommissioning. I appreciate all the sensitivities that the question attracts, but we must try to find a way through the problems—which I believe, in practical terms, can be only on the basis of the formula proposed by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues, involving some decommissioning during negotiations.

I hope that we can approach the debate in a new way. Much has changed since 5 March. Electoral uncertainties, in the United Kingdom at least, are out of the way. We as a Government have done all that we can to provide reassurance and clarity in regard to our policy. We have shown that we are a "what you see is what you get" Government. In my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's speech in Belfast on 16 May, we set out the fundamentals clearly. In particular, my right hon. Friend made clear our total commitment to the principle of consent: Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom unless there is clear and formal consent to the contrary. But he also made it clear that we seek a Northern Ireland in which all traditions can feel equally comfortable, and to which they can give allegiance.

I believe that the feeling that led the people of Great Britain to vote so overwhelmingly for change—a desire for a modern Britain, with old conflicts put behind us—is also very evident in Northern Ireland. I believe that there is a widespread wish to resolve old differences, to put an end to violence and to construct a confident new future that is both co-operative and tolerant.

Let me touch briefly on the role of Sinn Féin. We want Sinn Féin to be in the political process; but negotiations are inconceivable if one of the parties comes with its mandate backed up by the threat of armed force, which is why an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, evidenced in word and deed, is essential to Sinn Féin's entry. That is now the view overwhelmingly held in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and also by those around the world—such as the President of the United States—who follow the issue with interest. The republican movement should renounce violence unequivocally. We have made it absolutely clear that, if it does not, talks will proceed without its members.

As I have just spoken of the President of the United States, let me put on record our gratitude for the help and co-operation that we have received from the United States Administration. It has been crucially important to the Northern Ireland peace process. We are grateful not just to Senator Mitchell for chairing the talks, but to Mr. Holkeri and John de Chastelain, who acted as vice-chairs. We are also grateful for the help that many US business people have given Northern Ireland. They



have put their money where their mouths are and have delivered jobs and investment, which is helpful to the process.

That is the background to tonight's debate. The draft order would bring back into existence the forum that was established by the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996. The forum is not technically part of the talks themselves. It is open to all the 110 delegates returned in the elections of May last year. It was suspended by order in March, following debates here and in another place. Because the multi-party talks were suspended for the time being, the forum had to be suspended too.

Before the general election, during a debate in the House, I said that, if I were in a position to introduce the order, I would trust that

"the central objective of discussing issues relevant to the promotion of dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland will be at the forefront of people's minds when they begin again to take part in the forum debates."—[*Official Report*, 19 March 1997: Vol. 292, c. 999.]

I repeat that call tonight.

We moved as quickly as we could to restore the forum. Its first meeting in 1996 came after the talks had opened, and we envisaged the same ordering of events now. The order will come into effect tomorrow, as the talks open. The forum will be legally free to meet once their session is over for the week. I know that some think that that should have happened sooner, but I believe that the outcome, as well as being practically inevitable, is right in principle.

Views differ about the work of the forum so far. Although it has investigated a range of issues of current concern in Northern Ireland and has produced some useful and interesting reports, the interests of the whole community are best served when it concentrates on its principal remit, which is the promotion of dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the forum could become more positive if all the parties entitled to seats were to take them. I am conscious of the reasons that led the Social Democratic and Labour party members to leave after the events of Drumcree last year. I also appreciate that what has, at times, been said in the forum would not readily attract them back, and has upset and angered members present. Nevertheless, it provides an opportunity to improve the climate in which the search for an overarching political settlement goes on through the pursuit of new thinking in areas that bear on political advance by delegates from all parts of the community.

The role that is conferred on the forum is a useful one.

**Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): Will my right hon. Friend confirm her commitment to the Mitchell principles on decommissioning? It should take place in parallel, and should not be a precondition to Sinn Féin or any other organisation participating in negotiations.

**Marjorie Mowlam**: I implied, and I shall make it clear now, that we believe, as did the previous Government, that our handling of the difficult issue of decommissioning should be in line with the Mitchell principles. In articles 34 and 35 of his report, Senator Mitchell said that it was not necessary for decommissioning to take place before talks started or for

it to wait to the very end, but that it should happen in parallel, while the talks took place. That confirms the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan). That is our position, and that of the previous Government, and we shall work hard to achieve that. There is some agreement on that issue, but we would be misleading ourselves if we believed that there was close agreement. We and the Irish Government are working towards achieving such agreement, and I hope that we shall have a chance to do so with the other parties when the talks open tomorrow.

**Rev. Martin Smyth** (Belfast, South): Will the right hon. Lady clarify that decommissioning is not one of the Mitchell principles? It was part of the proposals and not one of the principles, which we accepted.

**Marjorie Mowlam**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right, and I should have clarified that point. There must be an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire before people can enter the talks, and an agreement to the six Mitchell principles. All parties must make a commitment to democratic and non-violent ways forward. We cannot expect anyone to sit in talks with people who are negotiating while using violence when it suits them. There must be that commitment if people are to have faith in the ceasefire and to negotiate. The decommissioning issue has delayed the talks for many months, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West knows.

We must get some momentum into the process when the talks start again tomorrow. Hon. Members who are present tonight and those who are unable to be with us because they are in South Africa have sat for many months trying to reach agreement, and have so far failed. We together with Senator Mitchell, the Irish Government and participants from all the parties must make a strong, concerted effort to get some impetus on decommissioning, or the process will be held up again.

**Mr. Harry Barnes** (North-East Derbyshire): The Secretary of State rightly said that the ceasefire was the important consideration, and she referred to words and deeds. We are waiting for the words from Sinn Féin, and then the deeds must be verified. It may be fruitful to consider establishing a publicly funded, independent body to monitor events in the period leading up to Sinn Féin entering talks. That would ensure that people from both communities could present examples of what they thought were violations of ceasefire principles, and those could be checked and reported to the House. Such a procedure could be fruitful in the context of laying down terms for what the deeds have to be after the words have been pronounced.

**Marjorie Mowlam**: I understand the guts of what my hon. Friend is trying to achieve. I agree with the principle of where he is trying to go. However, if we waited while another independent body was set up and for a ceasefire to enable Sinn Féin to take part in the talks and to agree to the six Mitchell principles, we would be setting different conditions from those that are set for loyalist paramilitaries. In that sense, we must treat people equally and fairly. That is not to undermine my hon. Friend's basic point, that we must be sure that the words and deeds



[*Murjorie Mowlam*]

are such that people can trust in them. If that is not the case, there will not be the opportunity for people to join in the talks process.

I have said that if the words are strong, they will make the deeds have lesser weight. If people said tomorrow, "This is the end of the war, the war is over," the deeds would be of less importance. However, if the words were the same as they have been on earlier occasions, we would need the deeds, and we have said that the deeds will be judged by me. I shall look carefully at them in the round so as to take into account all the different aspects. I shall do that fairly and honestly.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): As someone who will be in those talks tomorrow morning and who has heard the Secretary of State speaking about the Mitchell principles, may I ask her for an opinion on whether all the other parties who will be sitting around the table in the talks in Castle Buildings tomorrow are adhering to the same Mitchell principles that she has enunciated?

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank the hon. Gentleman for a difficult question. It is a difficult judgment to call. There is no doubt that, faced with the violence over the weekend, and particularly the case of the RUC man who was taken out of a pub and kicked to death in Ballymoney, it is difficult to be sure that both sides are being treated equally. The difficulty is that we have to be sure of our facts before we act. From the evidence that has been provided to me up to now, I believe that the groups related to the loyalist groups in the talks, the Combined Loyalist Military Command, have not been associated with the violence. We assume from the evidence that we have received that other groups are related to that violence.

It would not be unfair to say to the hon. Gentleman that I am considering proscribing some of those groups. We need to wait for tomorrow's talks, because it is a matter for consideration in the talks process, as the hon. Gentleman knows because he has been in the talks more than most. The foundation of the talks procedure is that someone has to make a formal complaint. It is ultimately up to the two Governments, but I should like to wait for more evidence, see whether the parties have moved together and look at the evidence that they present. If it reaches that point, we can then sit down with the chairperson, Mr. Mitchell, and the Irish Government to review the situation.

If there is a violation of the six Mitchell principles, we shall look at that, but I hope that we can keep in the loyalist parties, if that is possible, because they have been a plus in the process. On the grounds that I set out earlier in my speech, we should like, if we can, to make the process inclusive of Sinn Féin, but it has to give us an unequivocal ceasefire and the commitment by word and deed to the six Mitchell principles, so that we know that there is a commitment to the democratic process.

I hope, therefore, that the revived forum will feel able to reach out across the community in Northern Ireland and to approach its work in a spirit of seeking the greatest degree of agreement across the divides. I hope, too, that the forum will consider carefully the relationship between its ability to fulfil its statutory remit and the style in which

its business is conducted and regulated. Much good can come from the forum, and I commend the draft order to the House.

11.49 pm

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): I congratulate the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on her appointment, and I thank her for her gracious tribute to her predecessor, Sir Patrick Mayhew, and for her words of welcome to me. I am not sure where she got the idea that my current position was temporary. Perhaps she knows something that I do not. I have to wait and see what happens.

I think that we all understand the difficulty of the task that the Secretary of State has undertaken and I know that those Conservative Members who have held her high office will appreciate the difficulty of that task. In past weeks, we have seen some of those difficulties. We saw them over the weekend with the land mine that was planted by the IRA, with the horrific murder of Constable Greg Taylor of Ballymoney—I think that the whole House would join me in sending our condolences and sympathy to his family—and with some of the preludes to the marching season. I do not think any of us, on either side of the House, believe that she has an easy task ahead, and we wish her well.

The Secretary of State asked about the bipartisan policy. Tonight is perhaps an indication of that as I certainly, on behalf of the Opposition, welcome the order. It fulfils undertakings that were given, both by her party and by mine, when the forum was suspended that it would be brought back into being at the same time as the talks resumed. She has cut it pretty fine with the talks starting tomorrow, but that particular commitment has been fulfilled and I welcome that.

I think I can say on behalf of all of us that we wish the Secretary of State success in the negotiations that begin tomorrow. I know from my personal experience that from 10 June onwards such negotiations are not easy. They are hard, complicated and sometimes frustratingly slow, but they are essential because they are the right way forward if an agreement is to be found in Northern Ireland. I realise, as I am sure the right hon. Lady does, that there are no short cuts, no quick fixes and no magic wands to be waved, and that this process can be taken forward only by painstaking negotiation, which is designed not just to achieve negotiating results, but to build confidence and to give the necessary reassurance which can make substantive progress possible. That, of course, must always include grinding out the details of the Mitchell recommendations and principles.

We can all use those terms easily, but when it comes to applying them in terms of creating confidence in the negotiations, we all know that they are much more complex and difficult than that. I am sure that, during the coming weeks and months, all the participants at Castle Buildings in Belfast will come to the table determined to try to find a way through the difficulties that we had before the talks were suspended in March, and to find a way through to the substantive negotiations that are their purpose.

The talks process was designed to be inclusive, but as we know, it is still without Sinn Féin. It is worth sometimes reminding ourselves that, although we talk about the process being incomplete, nine out of 10 parties are



represented, which between them represent 85 per cent. of the people of Northern Ireland. That is, on any view, a majority of both communities and perfectly capable of taking the process forward, if necessary.

At the moment, it seems that that is all that is available because as we know at this time, there has been no unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire. There has been no restoration of the ceasefire at all. Some people thought that there might be a de facto ceasefire, but that view was dashed on Saturday when the land mine was planted by the IRA, giving a message contrary to any idea that the IRA intended at this time to eschew violence in pursuance of its political objectives. I am afraid that the message that that gave was depressingly familiar. However, it emphasises the fact that we cannot negotiate with the republican movement or its representatives until they accept the democratic principles and the fact that only by exclusively peaceful methods can they pursue their political objectives.

That is why, in the statute that the right hon. Lady will have to operate if ever the time comes when she does invite Sinn Fein, she will be looking not just at whether there is a ceasefire in word and deed, but at whether there is a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and a commitment to adhere to democratic principles.

We have watched with interest the contacts between the right hon. Lady's officials and Sinn Fein. We have always exercised the greatest caution in that respect, although the option was always available. I am sure that she will agree that adherence to democratic principles cannot and must not be fudged—it has to be clear if there is to be the confidence that will allow the process to be taken forward by all those participating. I should be interested to know whether, in the light of the incidents over the weekend, any consideration has been given to whether there will be further meetings.

I also welcome the indication that the right hon. Lady gave us again today that the Government are continuing with the policy followed by the Conservative Government—namely, that the democratic process cannot be held to ransom by one political party. If a party excludes itself, as Sinn Fein is doing at the moment, the process must go on without it. If it comes in later, it must accept the position that it finds within that process and not expect the process to start all over again.

It is perhaps ironic that the forum being resurrected by the order is open to Sinn Fein, and has been since last June's elections. Sinn Fein could and can still take its seats there. It is indicative of what I believe to be an à la carte approach to democracy—as we saw when its two Members of Parliament wanted to have the facilities of the House without participating in our deliberations—that it has not taken its seats in the forum.

In welcoming the order, I recognise that as well as a fair amount of politics over the past year the forum did prove that it was hard working, that it was ready to look at the details and that it was not all about rhetoric. When it was set up it was envisaged as a forum for Northern Ireland's elected representatives to discuss issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding, although I think that it is fair to say that the ways in which it sometimes did that were not necessarily the first that one would think of as relevant in that context.

I hope that in this, the second of the two years available under the statute, the forum will now extend its activities to fulfil the wider expectations originally set out for it.

Of those, perhaps the most important is the interface with the public and the forum being seen as a vehicle for hearing the views of the wider community and interest groups on how to take peace and reconciliation forward in Northern Ireland.

The forum is not and has never been a part of the negotiations, but I believe that it is able to help to create the environment and atmosphere in Northern Ireland that will make the negotiations less fraught. That promotion of dialogue and understanding, which is very much at the heart of the concept of the forum, is a challenge to all the political parties in Northern Ireland. I hope that in and through the forum they will all indicate that they are prepared to rise to that challenge.

**Mr. Canavan:** The right hon. Gentleman rightly laid emphasis on a bipartisan approach. However, when Sir Patrick Mayhew was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, he said that he did not want to introduce immediate legislation based on the North commission report on marches. Can we expect a bipartisan approach if the new Labour Government introduce appropriate legislation? Will we have the Opposition's support?

**Mr. Ancram:** The hon. Gentleman is asking for an entirely blank cheque. That has never been a part of any bipartisan approach. Sir Patrick Mayhew introduced certain elements of the North report, and he rightly believed that, because of their possible implications, other elements required further consideration. We hope that the Secretary of State will talk to us about her proposals—as Sir Patrick Mayhew consulted her about his position—and we will consider any proposals that she makes according to whether we believe that they can work. I am sure that she, too, will wish to consider that aspect of the matter in deciding possible legislation.

I join the Secretary of State in hoping that the Social Democratic and Labour party, having made its protest, will now return to the forum to recreate the breadth of dialogue that will give real hope to the Province. In Northern Ireland, staying away must become a weapon of the past. I hope that taking part will become the message for the future.

I therefore welcome the order, and I wish the Government God speed in their endeavours to achieve agreement. I cannot with honesty declare that I shall miss being in Castle Buildings tomorrow, but a little bit of my heart will be with the Secretary of State when she starts the talks.

**Marjorie Mowlam:** I should like to answer the right hon. Gentleman's question about meetings with Sinn Fein after the discovery in Poleglass at the weekend. There is no doubt that that was a very serious incident, involving a large bomb which could have caused massive destruction if it had been detonated. As I said, meetings between officials and Sinn Fein depend on events. Currently no other meetings are scheduled. After Sinn Fein and officials met last week, no meetings were scheduled for this week. We shall, however, keep the situation under careful review, especially when a decision on further meetings is taken.

**Mr. Ancram:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that clarification, and I am sure that she is right to adopt that attitude.



[Mr. Ancram]

I wish the forum well in building an understanding on which a new future for Northern Ireland can be established. The Opposition support the order.

12.1 am

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): Without joining the love-in, I should like to wish the Secretary of State well in the years to come. I extend that wish to the other Ministers who have come to the north of Ireland and who are making and have made contributions to the process. I thank them for that, and I wish them well.

I am not a great adherent of bipartisanship, because I believe that when issues are really serious it can be a drawback and have a stifling effect. It can prevent the type of thinking and dialogue which is essential in crisis situations.

We should ask ourselves one simple question. Is there not an air of unreality about a situation in which an hour and a half of parliamentary time is provided for a debate on the re-creation of a body, such as a forum, while there is insufficient parliamentary time to establish the North commission and powers that will probably be needed to stand between the future and another summer such as we had last year?

Today's debate is a microcosm of that air of unreality. It also shows us that, by becoming too cosy in a forum such as the House, we may be stifling thinking and debate and placing them into a cocoon, rather than stimulating them. I believe that this debate is nothing but a cocoon around some of the real issues. The forum is not important in terms of solving these problems. As the former Secretary of State said, it is a new opportunity

"to listen to the view of others . . . in order to promote dialogue and understanding."—[Official Report, 18 April 1996; Vol. 275, c. 859.]

The present Secretary of State has reiterated that, and it is a wise and noble thought. The reality, however, is that the forum was a price paid by the previous Government to the Unionist Opposition, who had sufficient numbers in the House to demand the price and get it. The price that they demanded was the forum, which in fact has no role in the negotiations. That is the honest position.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mallon: I will give way in a moment. I have outlined the honest position. If we want to fool ourselves for the next hour or so that what we are doing tonight is of great import, that is grand—but do we want to face the reality?

Mr. Hunter: I have heard the hon. Gentleman's argument before, but there is something that I do not understand. In the Republic of Ireland, a forum was established to promote dialogue and understanding. The hon. Gentleman supported it and his party took part—he may even have done so himself. What is the fundamental difference between that attempt in the Republic of Ireland to promote dialogue and understanding and the lesser role being played by the forum in the Province of Northern Ireland?

Mr. Mallon: I should have thought that one of the self-evident differences was that at that time there were

no negotiations in the north of Ireland. Those negotiations had not been set up. We were continuing in a political limbo, and the opportunity existed to create a body which would try to bring Sinn Féin into the political process after the declaration of the ceasefire. It was right to embark on that, but it is also right to remember that that forum was the only all-Ireland political body created on the island of Ireland since partition—and it was blown out of existence by the IRA. It is often forgotten that that all-Ireland body was destroyed by the IRA. That tells us something about their attitude.

I wish to deal now with a few specific matters. Let us strip away the platitudes and some of the things that we have to say. I understand that Secretaries of States and former Secretaries of State, Ministers of State and former Ministers of State, have to say certain things but I should like to challenge some of them today. It is my job to challenge things, as gently as I possibly can—that is my role.

First, what is decommissioning? It is not something vague or something that the very name can hide. It is the getting rid of illegal arms held by proscribed organisations. I suggest that we look carefully at responsibility in relation to the holding and use of illegal weaponry. I go further and suggest that the primary and fundamental responsibility rests with the two sovereign Governments involved.

There is a cop-out, and the Secretary of State touched on it. The two main parties—the Ulster Unionist party and my party, the SDLP—could not solve the decommissioning issue in the previous section of the talks. We are not Governments, we do not have any powers, we do not have any authority and we do not have any arms, but there are two sovereign Governments in the talks process telling us, "Get on with it, lads; deal with decommissioning." I put it to the two Governments that, as from tomorrow, it should be made clear within the negotiations that the primary responsibility lies with them to effect those changes that will protect life on the island of Ireland.

The political parties will facilitate and will, I hope, ensure, as the Mitchell report says, that decommissioning is addressed and carried in parallel with negotiations. The onus is being put on the smaller political parties—there are three of us here from my party—to decommission the entire organisations of the Irish Republic Army, the Ulster Defence Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Red Hand commandos and the Irish National Liberation Army. There is something unfair and dishonest about that, evading the core of the problem. We shall try to face up to our responsibilities, but the primary responsibility does not lie with the political parties, which do not have arms.

My second point is crucial. We have talked about the Mitchell principles—as opposed to the proposals. Those principles are the logical conclusion of being part of the political process. The conclusions are an adherence to the democratic process and an abhorrence of and moving away from the use of arms. The public perception of the process that I am part of tomorrow is compromised by the violence carried out by organisations which are advised—or whatever—by parties in the negotiations. I am not trying to get rid of anybody—I want everybody in—but it is difficult to sustain the credibility of the talks process when people are being killed, when arms are being used and when breaches of the Mitchell principles are being ignored. Can we afford to continue to ignore that?



My third point is that I would like the term "the peace process" to go out of the political vocabulary both within and outside the negotiations. Every time I hear or use the phrase, I ask myself what it means. Is it a process towards peace? I do not think so. Peace must be the starting point. Everything else derives from peace. Then there is a political process. It will take time to get the necessary political arrangements. The resolution of conflict in its various forms stems from peace, as does the healing process, which will take generations and will require a sense of space and time. Those processes do not lead to peace. If they are to be successful, they must derive from peace. The problem is difficult enough without continuing violence. Without peace, it will be not just difficult, but almost impossible.

My last point is that consent has been used in the House and outside it. I take some credit for ensuring, in a forum that I attended, that the issue of consent was faced. That was the forum for peace and reconciliation in Dublin, when I was across the table from Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin could not respond. It stayed out of the nationalist consensus on the island of Ireland. All the nationalist parties north and south subscribed to the principle of consent; Sinn Féin stayed outside that nationalist consensus.

The coin of consent, however, has two sides. It is a responsibility of the Unionist political community and of British Governments to ensure that both sides of that coin of consent are fundamental parts of the political arrangements that we have to make. Consent applies to any change in the position of Northern Ireland. My consent does not mean that I have to agree—nor do I agree—with the constitutional position in the north of Ireland. In the democratic process, I must have the right to try to change that constitutional position by peaceful, democratic means. Until I do that, I must have the right to live in that part of the island of Ireland with dignity, with equality, with justice and with a sense of unity of purpose, which is my entitlement.

The consent that is given by the nationalist parties in the island of Ireland must be reciprocated in a very fundamental way. That is something that simply has not been faced up to. It has not been faced up to by Governments here and it has not been faced up to by Unionist political parties in the north of Ireland.

Only when we start to get to the core of the problems that we face shall we realise how fundamental the changes will be. Like it or not, there is a changed political scenario. Like it or not, the arrangement that was made in 1921 is an anachronism which is no longer adequate in the world in which we live. Like it or not, a new approach is required. It is not enough for parties in this place to bat platitudes across the Floor of the House, as sometimes occurs. Unless we all recognise that we are in a totally changed and changing situation and that we must bring a new view to it all, the violence—the young policeman who was kicked to death, the young man in Portadown who was kicked to death, the people who might have been killed by the 500 lb bomb at the weekend and those who have already been killed—will continue, and we shall continue with the platitudes. Alternatively, we can face up to the reality of what is required and of what has to be done: we can get the courage to go and do it and use this forum and others to provide the imaginative stimulus that will allow us to do that.

12.17 am

**Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford):** We in the Ulster Unionist parliamentary party welcome the order. I have not seen a debate on Northern Ireland so well attended as this evening's. It is encouraging that we have such interest in Northern Ireland—particularly among Government Members, and I pay tribute to that—because it is one of the most difficult situations facing this Government. It is very dangerous indeed.

I thank the Secretary of State for her tribute to the former leader of our party, Lord Molyneux, the former Member of Parliament for Lagan Valley, and for her welcome to our two new colleagues in the Ulster Unionist parliamentary party, my hon. Friends the Members for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) and for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson)

I pay tribute to the spokesman for Her Majesty's Opposition, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), for the way in which he served Northern Ireland. We did not always agree. We disagreed with him over the way in which he damaged our education system in Northern Ireland, but realise that he gave his time and best efforts to Northern Ireland, which we certainly appreciate.

We welcome the Secretary of State and her team of Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office. We wish them well because we know that, as representatives of the main political party in Northern Ireland and of the Government of the day, we have to work together in trying to resolve the terrible issues facing us in the Province.

I was very encouraged indeed that, within days of taking office, the Prime Minister gave priority to the Northern Ireland issue. He was following the example of the previous Prime Minister, to whom we are grateful for the time, effort and courtesy he extended to us in the Ulster Unionist party and, indeed, to all other political parties in Northern Ireland, on matters affecting Northern Ireland. I am delighted that the new Prime Minister has shown the same interest and concern about the situation and that his first speech as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was in Belfast and was well received by both sections of the community. That in itself is an achievement in Northern Ireland politics.

**Mr. Roger Stott (Wigan):** I am very grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's comments about my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Why, therefore, was he so disingenuous this morning when he referred to what my right hon. Friend said about the Irish famine?

**Mr. Taylor:** Trust the hon. Gentleman to introduce an unpleasant matter into a debate on Northern Ireland. We are trying to lower the temperature of Northern Ireland, but as usual his contributions are unhelpful.

**Mr. Stott:** You said it.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst):** Order.

**Mr. Taylor:** The debate is about the forum, not the talks. Yes, the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 created both the forum and the talks process. I agree so much with what the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) said. We do not like the



[Mr. Taylor]

process being called the peace process. It is the political process for the future of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

As the Prime Minister said when he addressed the audience in the great Kings hall in Belfast, one of the realities of the situation is that no one in that hall in Belfast—not even the youngest people present—could foresee an united Ireland. That is one of the realities that the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh has to accept. Although I realise that people in other communities in Northern Ireland have to accept other realities, the reality to which the Prime Minister referred is one of the basic realities that the hon. Gentleman in return must accept if we are to make progress and achieve consent from the people of Northern Ireland. Ultimately, it will be an agreement supported with the consent of the people through a referendum that will count.

**Mr. Mallon:** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the previous Secretary of State, the previous Prime Minister and, by implication, the present Prime Minister that the agenda for negotiations was open ended, nothing was predetermined and nothing could be ruled out or ruled in? Does he agree that that is an accurate summation, and does he agree with the summation itself?

**Mr. Taylor:** I stand by what I said: one of the realities in Northern Ireland is that we must have the consent of the people. I shall return to that issue in my references to the Secretary of State. One of the qualifications for getting consent is that the settlement for Northern Ireland is within the framework of the United Kingdom. That is a reality to which those of a nationalist persuasion will have to give their consent, even though, as the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh said, it will not necessarily mean that they agree with it.

The debate is about the forum and not the political process at Stormont. Many of us will be leaving London at 6.30 am to return to Belfast for the talks that commence at Stormont at 10 am. Generally speaking, the forum has been a success. Eight of the 10 political parties in Northern Ireland participate in it. I have served on many elected bodies—at Stormont, at the old Parliament and the Assemblies, at the European Parliament for 10 years and in the House since 1983. I have therefore served on policy committees in all three institutions—at Westminster, Stormont and Strasbourg.

I have been delighted to experience the committee work of the new Northern Ireland forum in Belfast, where the representatives of eight political parties, from all traditions and all religious backgrounds, work together on social and economic issues. They work on bread-and-butter matters that affect all the people of Northern Ireland.

The forum has produced some excellent reports that have been almost ignored by the press and the media, even in Northern Ireland. Its reports include those on bovine spongiform encephalopathy, on the fishing industry and ones that, generally, Labour Members would have supported. For example, one criticised the then Government for their closure of the Dundonald training centre. The new Government want to increase training provision in Northern Ireland. It also produced reports that criticised the then Government's reduction in moneys for our schools throughout Northern Ireland.

That excellent work has been carried out by elected members. I support what the Secretary of State said—I hope that other parties that are not present on the forum will reconsider their position.

Sinn Fein was never excluded from the forum. It is not there by its own decision, no one closed the door on it. Representatives of the Social and Democratic Labour party, the sister party of the Labour party, walked out. It is led by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), who said that he would talk to anyone in Northern Ireland, anywhere and at any time. He and his party had such an opportunity at the forum, but, after a few months, they walked out. I think that that was a regrettable decision, although I understand the circumstances surrounding what happened. I hope that as a gesture of good will to the people of Northern Ireland the SDLP will reconsider its position and listen to the appeal by the Secretary of State and the Unionist community. I hope that it will consider returning to the forum and participating in the committee work on social and economic matters affecting the Province.

**Mr. Canavan:** Will the right hon. Gentleman reconsider the decision of his party not to participate in the British-Irish interparliamentary forum, which is extremely important to establishing a dialogue between this Parliament and the Dail? The Ulster Unionists are conspicuous by their absence. That body is possibly impoverished by their absence.

**Mr. Taylor:** I know very little about that body. I was not aware that it was important. It has nothing to do with the talks process or the order before the House tonight. It is considered by most people in Northern Ireland to be a junket. It is well known that it often meets when there are rugby internationals. It usually meets on a Friday, when the rugby match is on the Saturday. We know what goes on at that kind of junket.

The situation in Northern Ireland is extremely volatile. Hon. Members from Scotland, England and Wales do not realise how serious things are becoming on the ground. Tonight, we must give thanks to the police and the Army for what they do in the dangerous situation that exists in Northern Ireland, as it has for the past for 25 years. Those who live there and work with local people know how difficult things have become in the past few weeks. We have had some terrible incidents, including the killing of the young man in Portadown, that of the policeman at Ballymoney and the return of IRA violence.

The Secretary of State said that she would judge IRA-Sinn Fein on the basis of events on the ground. She seemed to imply that it was all right to have a bomb as long as it did not go off. I do not know what she meant by events on the ground, but the reality is that the IRA had a major bomb on the ground, and that it is the military wing of Sinn Fein—they are both members of the Irish republican movement and cannot be separated. We in the Ulster Unionists would say that the Secretary of State should not be considering talks with Sinn Fein while the IRA is active on the ground, regardless of whether a bomb goes off.

I was glad to read in *The Irish Times* today that the Dublin Government are reconsidering having any further contact with IRA-Sinn Fein, and I hope that the United Kingdom Government will take a similar line. We all have a duty, as the talks commence in Northern Ireland tomorrow, to be positive and try to make them succeed.



There has been progress, despite major difficulties. There was a difficulty over the appointment of a chairman; it was resolved. There were major difficulties over the rules of procedure; they were resolved. There was a great difficulty about the agenda for the first plenary session; that was finally agreed. Progress has been made, and the next stage is—I agree with the Secretary of State's phrase—to address the problem of decommissioning. We in the Ulster Unionist party believe that to address an issue means resolving it.

I do not expect much progress in the coming week, because there is an election in the southern part of Ireland later in the week, and until we know what Government will emerge there, there will not be full participation by all the political delegations; but I hope that all parties in Northern Ireland, from both communities, recognising how serious a situation is developing on the ground, will make every effort to be positive and reach agreement, because we need consent in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State represents a Government with a very large majority. Such Governments have existed before. This is our sovereign Parliament: it makes the laws and the decisions; but there must be consent among the people to whom the decisions will have to apply. The Government must not think that they can run roughshod over the people of Northern Ireland.

Consent is the basis for progress in Northern Ireland, and I hope that in considering her decisions in the weeks and months that lie ahead, the Secretary of State will recognise the importance of consent from the people who will look up to her as their senior political officer in Northern Ireland.

**Mr. Mallon:** On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it right and proper for an hon. Member to try to exercise a veto by threat over the decisions of a sovereign Government, in the same way as a veto is exercised over other people's right of opinion in Northern Ireland?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I am not sure that that is a point of order for the Chair. I think that the hon. Gentleman was expressing an opinion.

12.33 am

**Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down):** I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in the debate. I endorse the welcome that has been given to the Secretary of State and the entire Front-Bench team, and hope that their ministrations at the Northern Ireland Office will be fruitful for the people of Northern Ireland. I also pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State, and to the former Secretary of State, who is shortly to go to another place. We disagreed fundamentally with their team on many issues, but we were received with the courtesy with which such dialogue should be conducted, and I thank them for that.

The debate so far has centred on the backcloth to the order, which is simply the decision to re-enact section 3 of the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996, which concerned the creation of the forum. Much has been said already about the backcloth of violence, division and hatreds that bedevils our community in Northern Ireland, and indeed, in the south.

The legislation's intent was that the forum should be should be a place for

"the discussion of issues relevant to promoting dialogue and understanding within Northern Ireland."

That has been stated by both Front-Bench spokespersons, and by other hon. Members tonight, to be the primary objective. What the forum would not be was also clearly stated. It would not be a legislative, executive or administrative body and it would not determine the conduct, course or outcome of negotiations. The then Minister responsible for political development emphasised that its sole purpose was the promotion of dialogue and understanding by deliberative actions only. In discussing the forum tonight, we must measure its activities against the yardstick of whether it promoted understanding and dialogue. The answer must be a categorical no.

I listened with interest when the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) listed a series of what he described as very worthwhile reports that emanated from the forum and its committees. They dealt with BSE, fishing, education, roads and many other items on the social and economic agenda. However, those matters were already common cause among all the parties in Northern Ireland. The parties of Northern Ireland were united on the BSE crisis and in opposing the proposals of the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for the dismantling of our education system. Those socio-economic issues were not controversial. We must measure the forum's daily work not against those issues but against the promotion of dialogue and understanding. No hon. Member would argue that the pursuit of lifting the beef ban is directed towards dialogue and understanding in Northern Ireland, though it might come about as an abstruse side-effect of it.

**Mr. Barnes:** Is it not good that people should on occasion get together to discuss things on which they agree? Such agreement would be within a framework, and discussion and argument within a framework helps to clarify people's positions. The forum, like the Anglo-Irish parliamentary body, discusses many things on which there is agreement and can produce fruitful reports that can be voted on.

**Mr. McGrady:** I hear what my hon. Friend says but he is not comparing like with like. It is right for the Anglo-Irish parliamentary body to discuss such issues. It might be correct for the forum to discuss similar issues, but that was not the purpose for which it was established. Its purpose was to promote dialogue and understanding, and to create an atmosphere in which the inter-party talks would have the best possible environment to proceed. While I have already said that it is a good thing for the forum's committees to have dealt with such issues, that was not their primary purpose. Most of the parties agreed about them outside the forum. BSE and education were inter-party matters long before they were touched by the forum.

Let me get back the real yardstick by which we can judge whether the work of the forum was correct or not. There was the debate on flags and emblems, the debate on parity of esteem and the debate on marches and such matters. It is interesting to note what type of debate was taking place, because I and the community I represent considered them to be divisive and, in some cases, offensive.

It was stated of my own party that we "have a vested interest in having trouble in this province."



[Mr. McGrady]

It was also said of us:

"As for convincing the IRA to give up the armed struggle, what has the SDLP done but encourage the IRA to continue its destabilising activities?"

Are those the statements of statesmanship, of approaching the opposite number, or of trying to have reconciliatory dialogue? Obviously not.

A member of the Democratic Unionist party said that boycotts were

"being waged against our community by another section of the community who are so filled with hatred and invective against my community that they will stop at nothing. This boycott campaign is just another reflection of their hatred for the Protestant community."

Is that peacemaking? Is that not inflammatory? A member of the Ulster Unionist party stated:

"I have started my boycott. I will not shop in any Catholic shops."

Is that reconciliation? Is that the furtherance of what the forum was set up for?

That is why, when the Act was first debated, I said that there was a distinct possibility that the creation of such a forum would provide a platform for the worst type of divisive speeches and comments. It could be argued, although I shall not do so this morning, that, had we been present when those debates were taking place, the invective would have been a lot worse and more divisive, which would have placed a greater strain on inter-community relations.

The reason why the SDLP left the forum on 13 July last year—hon. Members will know that the 13 July follows 12 July and I know what that means in Northern Ireland—was that it was the only weapon available to a democratic party in Northern Ireland that had consistently opposed violence, struggled against violence and suffered violence from both the IRA and the UVF. It was the maximum expression of our rejection of the events at Drumcree last summer that we, as a democratic party, could exercise. I make no apology for having participated in that decision to withdraw. If this summer is the same as last summer, then God help us all in Northern Ireland. I will say, however, that if this summer is treated by those who are responsible for marches and those who are responsible for opposing marches with a degree of accommodation and understanding, we will be able to reconsider our position. Nothing is set in stone in Northern Ireland, and nor should it ever be.

The only point I wish to make this morning is that, in spite of the statements from both Front Bench speakers, the forum did not do the job for which it was set up and was, in fact, a contributory factor in enhancing the divisions in Northern Ireland.

12.44 am

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): Much ground has been covered in the debate. My colleagues and I welcome the new Labour spokesmen on Northern Ireland on the Government Front Bench. They will be received with the usual courtesy that Northern Ireland people extend to everyone. They will have the opportunity to exchange their views with us, as did the previous Government. We disagreed almost entirely with the Conservative Government.

Tonight, we cannot agree on the very basis on which the negotiations are going on. We have been told tonight that that basis is the Downing street declaration and the framework document. I do not know how many Members now in the Chamber have read those two documents. I do not know how many Members know what the people of Northern Ireland said when the documents were examined and voted on at elections. I do not know whether Members are aware that there is only one option in the framework document, and that is to go down the road that would eventually lead to a united Ireland. That is a road that the majority of the people of Northern Ireland will not be going down.

The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram), shakes his head, but he has been over this ground. He had the opportunity at the talks to refute what we said. Instead, he sat in silence. On many occasions the Secretary of State did not open his mouth after long speeches during which argument after argument was raised. The Secretary of State merely said, "I have nothing to say to you." That is the way in which they entered the talks.

The Dublin Government, the Social Democratic and Labour party and the IRA/Sinn Fein never wanted the forum. Indeed, they opposed it from the very beginning. It is not right to say that the forum has nothing to do with the talks process for it provides the way into that process. But without election to the forum one could not be present to engage in the talks process. That was the way in.

There was opposition from Dublin, from the SDLP, from Sinn Fein and from the right hon. Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam), who is now Secretary of State. She is on record about her opposition to the forum at the time of which I am speaking. In other words, there is widespread opposition.

The IRA, which wants to look at the Secretary of State's eyeballs, says that it wants to examine the eyeballs of Unionists. It had the opportunity to come to the forum, but it did not do so. Why was that? The IRA did not come because the forum mirrors proportions of people and their views. The talks do not do that. Those who were not elected, or could not be, to the forum came in only by talking up to those who came in under the 10 procedure. They had the same number of people at the talks table as those who had larger proportions of support.

In the talks process that is to commence tomorrow there will be no mirroring of the percentage of votes cast for a party in Northern Ireland. At the same time, the forum is like the House in that there is representation by proportion under the system that the Government agreed. That is why Sinn Fein will not attend. It does not want a democratic debate.

It is wrong for the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) to say that the forum did not tackle most difficult subjects. For example, the forum dealt with boycotting. It set up a committee to deal with it. That committee received representations from both religious sections of the community. It examined the Province in that it examined everyone who wanted to give evidence. The forum adopted the same approach towards parades. A parades committee went round the Province and heard representatives of all parties. On the committee were representatives of both religious communities in Northern Ireland. So it is wrong to say that they talked about BSE.



They talked about education and matters on which we are all agreed, but education is a dividing issue, too, in Northern Ireland.

It was very good that we were able to get together and have a good report on education, which the previous Prime Minister accepted, because the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) wanted to destroy the five boards in Northern Ireland and destroy our education. Everybody united, including representatives of the Roman Catholic schools, and gave evidence to the forum committee on education. That was very good. We got an agreement and won that particular battle.

I trust that the House takes into consideration that the forum did a useful job. But there was always intensive opposition to it. The Government did not like it. They castigated it and said things about it, because it was not a yes man to the Government. Other people criticised the forum. They could not get rid of it quickly enough, so when they wanted an adjournment of the talks, they rushed into the House and took away the right of the forum to continue. It could have continued under law until 30 May. It could have had a meeting before today, but the House said no, because Dublin wanted it out of the way. The Social Democratic and Labour party wanted it out of the way. Sinn Fein wanted it out of the way, so they got it out of the way.

I made it clear that if the forum was not recalled my party would not be at the talks until it was recalled and had a sitting. My party will be following that. I do not make statements to my electorate in an election and not keep them. I will keep to that statement. We will not be there tomorrow, but the farce is that, tomorrow, the Foreign Secretary of the south of Ireland is travelling up because it is an election gimmick. He will be in Stormont and then this week there will be the election in the south. There should not be a meeting tomorrow. It will be adjourned anyway, because there will not be a Government in the south. They will have no representation there. So why rush it in the way that it has been rushed? The forum should never have been abandoned. It could have gone on, and then after the 30th it could have been given fresh powers. That was the attitude of the House, but instead it was rudely dismissed.

**Mr. Canavan:** I am a wee bit perplexed because the hon. Gentleman describes himself as a Unionist. Does he accept the sovereignty of the House with regard to his constituency and the six counties of Northern Ireland? If the House passes legislation, for example to implement the recommendations of Professor North's report on parades in Northern Ireland, will the hon. Gentleman commend that legislation to his constituents?

**Rev. Ian Paisley:** No, I will not, because the hon. Gentleman does not commend. I sat in the House when he did not commend to his constituents what the House was doing, and rightly so.

**Mr. Canavan:** But I am not a Unionist.

**Rev. Ian Paisley:** Yes, but it does not matter what someone's political persuasion is—

**Mr. Canavan:** It does.

**Rev. Ian Paisley:** It does not. [Interruption.] If the House were to say tonight that Northern Ireland is to be

part of the Republic, it could not implement the arrangement, because the people are not for that. The Tory Government thought that they could implement the poll tax, but could they? No. They had to lose their leader and do a somersault. The Government can force on people only what people are prepared to accept. We must accept the laws of the House, although we have power to protest against them. I have protested against laws made by the House, and I have done time in prison for doing so. I make no apology for that. I am not prepared to say to the House, "Do what you like with us, and we will accept it"; nor would any other democrat.

The vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland—including a large number of Roman Catholics: according to Mr. Denis Faul, a Roman Catholic priest who is prominent in the north, at least 15 to 17 per cent.—want to stay in the Union. Those people do not want a united Ireland, and it is no use the House saying to the people of Northern Ireland, "You must have a united Ireland".

Perhaps the present Government are changing the goal posts. I was told by the Government to attend talks, because those talks were about a settlement firmly within the United Kingdom. I went to them to discuss how we could secure a settlement in the United Kingdom. If the attitude is that we must be pushed out of the United Kingdom, that is not why the talks were called for. There is, however, a solution to the problem. The House has passed legislation allowing the Secretary of State, at the stroke of her pen, to hold a referendum in Northern Ireland at any time to decide whether the people there want to remain within the United Kingdom.

I asked the last Government why they did not resurrect the legislation, and deal with that matter first. After holding the referendum, they could go on to talk about how Northern Ireland should be governed within the Union. I challenge the Secretary of State. There is going to be a discussion about a referendum in Scotland, which the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) wants—

**Mr. Canavan:** No, I do not.

**Rev. Ian Paisley:** The hon. Gentleman does not want a referendum in Scotland?

**Mr. Canavan:** No, I do not. In fact, I take the view that, owing to the Conservative wipe-out in Scotland, we have a mandate to proceed with the setting up of a Scottish Parliament without any need for a referendum. As for the constitutional question in Northern Ireland, I asked an explicit question regarding an internal matter—not with regard to whether Northern Ireland should be reunited with the Republic, but with regard to internal legislation on, for example, parades. Would the hon. Gentleman accept legislation from the House on the conduct of parades?

**Rev. Ian Paisley:** If the North resolution is passed, it will be the law; but what is it for? It is to hand over to a body—not elected—the power of the police. Moreover, one of the members of that body is an officer in the constituency party of the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume)—the chairman, I believe. [HON. MEMBERS: "Chairperson."] The chairperson, then.

It is very strange that, in that committee, unionism is not represented at all. One member represents the so-called Protestant paramilitaries. Tonight, the



[Rev. Ian Paisley]

hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) asked whether the Secretary of State believed that the loyalist paramilitaries represented in the talks were keeping to the Mitchell proposals. At the talks, I in my foolishness drew the attention of both Governments to what the Protestant military outlawed combined military command had said. It had said that it was going to kill someone—

*It being one and a half hours after the motion was entered upon, MR DEPUTY SPEAKER put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16 (1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Community documents).*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996 (Revival of Section 3) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 15th May, be approved.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** We come to motion No. 4 on the Order Paper. It is not moved. We now come to the Adjournment.

**Sir Peter Emery (East Devon):** On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Do I understand that motion No. 4 has not been moved?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** It was not moved.

## Privates Fisher and Wright

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Dowd.]*

12.59 am

**Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke):** I first pay tribute to the former hon. Member for Ayr, Mr. Philip Gallie, who campaigned strenuously on behalf of Guardsmen Fisher and Wright. Conservatives Members miss him greatly.

I also place on the record the involvement and support of the hon. Member for Carrick, Cummock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), one of whose constituents is the mother of Guardsman Fisher. He has met her and seeks to help in every way possible. I also acknowledge the involvement of the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh); Guardsman Wright is his constituent. Both hon. Members substantially agree with the points that I shall make.

I also acknowledge the interest and concern of my right hon. Friend the Member for Devises (Mr. Antram) and my hon. Friends the Members for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) and for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

On 4 September 1992, Guardsmen Fisher and Wright and others were patrolling in support of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in the New Lodge area of Belfast. Fisher was then 24 years old; Wright was 18. Both were young men of excellent record and good character. It was their first tour of duty in Northern Ireland, but they had experienced intensive training with the Scots Guards. They were as well trained and as well prepared as is possible.

At that time, one of the IRA's favoured weapons was the Mk 15 grenade, or coffee jar bomb: a jar filled with shrapnel, Semtex and a detonator. Fisher and Wright knew from their training that the IRA tried to lure Army patrols into an ambush, and threw those grenades, often from behind parked vehicles. There had been more than a dozen such incidents in the weeks preceding September 1992.

On 4 September, the patrol of which the guardsmen were part stopped for routine questioning a young man, Mr. Peter McBride, who was carrying a bag. Before the bag could be searched, McBride tore the radio earpiece out of the patrol commander's ear and fled. He leapt one wall, ran through a garden and cleared another wall. Fisher and Wright pursued, repeatedly shouting warnings to stop, but McBride ignored those warnings. Three streets later, the guardsmen recognised that a situation was developing that was the mirror image of training scenarios.

McBride, still clutching a bag that he had not wanted to be searched, had succeeded in drawing them away from their unit and was running towards a parked car. Fisher and Wright gave a final warning, which McBride again ignored. He was shot and killed. There was no grenade in the bag, and McBride was not a member of the IRA or any other terrorist organisation. Reportedly, his mother still goes to the cemetery where his body lies and asks, "What did you run for?"

To argue for the early release of Fisher and Wright, as I and many people do, is most emphatically not to deny or belittle the grief of the McBride family. Fisher and