

## Political Talks (Northern Ireland)

3.30 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Sir Patrick Mayhew):** With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the political talks concerning Northern Ireland. The talks were built on those which were held last year. Like them, they took as ground rules my predecessor's statement to the House on 26 March 1991.

The first strand of the new talks began in Belfast under my predecessor's chairmanship on 9 March this year, and they resumed on 29 April under my chairmanship, to consider political arrangements within Northern Ireland itself. By the beginning of July I thought that it was appropriate to propose that the other two strands be launched. Accordingly, on 6 July, the second strand, involving both the Irish and British Governments and concerning relationships in the whole island of Ireland, was begun. We met initially in London, and subsequently in Belfast and Dublin. That strand has taken place under the distinguished chairmanship of Sir Ninian Stephen. To him, and to the Australian Government who permitted him to be available, we all owe an enormous amount of gratitude, particularly since in the latter stages he readily accepted an invitation to help us in our proceedings across all three strands.

On 28 July in Dublin the two Governments held the opening meeting of the third strand concerning future relationships between them.

Throughout the talks I have received wise and indefatigable support from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley). In particular, he chaired a most fruitful series of strand 1 committee sessions, and has often deputised for me in the other strands.

The present talks, like those last year, were stipulated to be held during a specified gap between meetings of the Anglo-Irish intergovernmental conference, provided for under the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Before the talks resumed after our own general election, the two Governments announced that the next meeting of the intergovernmental conference would not be before the end of July. Since then the gap has been twice extended. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach announced on 25 September, in a final extension, that the next meeting of the conference would be held on 16 November. More than six months have accordingly been available for these talks.

We have not yet succeeded in the ambitious task of securing an overall settlement, that is to say, "a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland, and between the peoples of these islands."

Since the talks were held on the basis 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",

the question of a partial settlement did not arise. All the same, the talks have seen substantive and detailed engagement on issues of the first importance.

In strand 1 the Northern Ireland parties, together with the British Government, identified common themes and

principles which should underlie any new political institutions in Northern Ireland, and examined possible structures which might reflect these.

In strand 2, in which of course the Irish Government have also been participants, delegations discussed fundamental aspects of relationships within the island of Ireland, and of the realities underlying them, including constitutional issues and questions of identity and allegiance. We examined the scope for enhanced co-operation within the island of Ireland, in the social, economic, and security fields, among others. We considered the nature of the structures which might best serve such co-operation.

In strand 3 the two Governments, as co-signatories of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, addressed, in liaison with the other participants, possible principles for a new and more broadly-based agreement, and possible intergovernmental arrangements.

Much has been done to identify and enlarge the common ground, and to increase understanding and respect for the participants' respective positions. The process has involved hard work and commitment from all the participants. The talks participants have collectively reaffirmed their total abhorrence of, and unqualified opposition to, all forms of terrorism, from whatever source they may come. Nothing has taken place to alter my firm view that it was right to bring together the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland and the two Governments to address, in a single process, a comprehensive agenda. It remains my judgment that, with good will and application, a comprehensive settlement can yet be secured. Those qualities are not lacking.

Yesterday the talks participants agreed and issued a statement, copies of which have been placed in the Library. In it they recognised that

"while at this time there is no basis to agree a settlement, they have identified and discussed most, if not all, of the elements which would comprise an eventual settlement; they have developed a clear understanding of each other's positions; and established constructive dialogue on ways in which an accommodation might be reached on some of the key issues which divide them".

All recognised the great value of that dialogue. The two Governments expressed their view yesterday that further dialogue was both necessary and desirable. The four Northern Ireland parties agreed with that, and accordingly undertook to

"enter into informal consultations with a view to seeking a way forward."

The House, although doubtless disappointed that we have not been able to achieve fuller agreement, will welcome that commitment. The objectives of the talks process remain valid and achievable. That is the expressed opinion of the independent chairman, Sir Ninian Stephen, and it is my opinion. The objectives are realistic. We have a duty therefore to build on what has been begun, however slow that process has been, and not to give up. We have a duty not to lose patience with what is a deeply historic problem; not to give way to exasperation; and not to recriminate.

Her Majesty's Government for their part, therefore, will steadily persevere. We shall maintain our line of approach to these objectives and continue also our commitment to resolute, fair and just government in Northern Ireland. Not only the people of Northern Ireland but the people of the rest of these islands—let us not forget them—deserve that of us.

3.39 pm

**Mr. Kevin McNamara** (Kingston upon Hull, North): I thank the Secretary of State for his fairly full and comprehensive statement and take this opportunity to join him and associate the Opposition in thanking Sir Ninian Stephen for his work. We share what must be his regret that it has not been possible to reach heads of agreement.

The Labour party welcomes the progress that has been made, and the understanding reached as a result of the talks process. For the first time, an agenda was reached that recognised the three primary relationships upon which any future settlement must be based in Ireland. The fact that this agenda was acceded to by all the parties has to be seen as a major breakthrough which should be built upon. The Labour party welcomes the undertakings given by the parties to maintain bilateral talks and discussions to maintain the dialogue.

In November 1990, the Secretary of State's predecessor declared:

"The British Government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland."

May we assume that this is still the attitude of Her Majesty's Government?

While it would have been useful, after nearly two years of talks, for the Government to have published a paper outlining the current position, as the four main constitutional parties have undertaken to continue negotiating, and some have already published their latest positions, it is probably better for the Government to hold back so as not to prejudice any future possible agreement. However, there will come a time when such a document will be necessary. In any event, if the Irish parties can reach an agreement amongst themselves, no British Government will seek to undermine it.

Some voices will call on the Secretary of State to impose a solution. I hope that he will resist such blandishments. Will he give an undertaking that there will be no alteration in the status quo in Northern Ireland or in the House while the dialogue is taking place without the agreement of all the parties? The basic problem throughout the process of the talks has been that, although the parties have used the same language in their attitude to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, they have meant entirely different things. This is a contradiction which must still be addressed.

While the talks are in abeyance, the Anglo-Irish Agreement remains in force, and indeed it should be widened and deepened. If it becomes apparent that there is little chance of the parties securing agreement, then we must move further towards a greater sharing of the responsibility between the two Governments in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his endorsement of what I said about Sir Ninian Stephen. I am grateful also for his welcome to the agreement by all the participants that these talks should continue the process of consultation. He asked whether the British Government stood by the assertion, made by my predecessor, that we have

"no selfish economic or strategic interest"

in the present constitutional position of Northern Ireland. That is certainly the case. There is no qualification to that, nor to the undertaking that my predecessor gave on 26 March 1991 that so long as it remains the wish of most of those living in Northern Ireland that Northern Ireland

should remain part of the United Kingdom, so it shall. There will be no change of status, save if there is a change in the wish of the majority.

I also welcome what the hon. Gentleman said about possible publication at this stage of an account of these negotiations. It was wise of him to recognise that, in the light of the parties' willingness and wish to continue to consult, it might be damaging if an account of who said what and when were published, particularly in the light of the understanding that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

There is no question of an imposed solution. The British Government are doing all in their power to seek a settlement of this deeply rooted historic problem that is arrived at by agreement with all those who are concerned with it.

The hon. Gentleman asked for an undertaking that there would be no alteration of the status quo in Northern Ireland while the dialogue is continuing. I give him that undertaking without any qualification.

It remains the case, as is evidenced by the fact that the intergovernmental conference is to take place next Monday 16 November, that the Anglo-Irish Agreement remains in force.

**Mr. Andrew Hunter** (Basingstoke): I deeply regret that the process has not resulted in positive conclusions, but will my right hon. and learned Friend contemplate that the chances of future agreements might be increased if the Irish Government showed more flexibility with regard to articles 2 and 3? I also draw my right hon. and learned Friend's attention to the public statements of the leader of the Alliance party, who expressed the belief that greater flexibility on the part of the Social Democratic and Labour party would greatly help future talks.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I share my hon. Friend's regret that we have not achieved a greater degree of convergence—of agreement. It would be unwise of me to be drawn into—

**Mr. Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover): Convergence—it is a joke.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** It is not one that the hon. Gentleman understands—a discussion of individual ingredients in the conversations that have taken place throughout the process during the past six months. It is fairly well known among the parties where the sticking points have been and where there has been what has amounted to quite a wide area of agreement. I do not wish to be drawn today into commenting on what one party may have said about another or anything of that kind. Recrimination will not be helpful to us, but a welcome to the parties' agreement to continue consultation will usefully come out of the House.

**Mr. James Molyneux** (Lagan Valley): I join in paying tribute to Sir Ninian Stephen, as we did at Stormont yesterday, and, on behalf of my party, I express our appreciation and thanks to the Secretary of State, his predecessor and the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley), who, as the Secretary of State said, chaired one of the most vital strands, strand 1, at which there was considerable agreement and progress.

As the Secretary of State has said, the climate definitely has improved. I am sure that he did not wish to place

[Mr. James Molyneux]

undue emphasis on that little phrase that he used, perhaps accidentally implying that progress had not been made on a beginning for new relationships within Northern Ireland, because we have moved forward to some extent.

In view of that, will the Secretary of State facilitate the Northern Ireland parties in further developing the degree of co-operation that they have shown so often in the past on, for example, the economy and social matters, and a whole host of issues of vital importance to the people of Northern Ireland, and do that around the table in a way which, apparently, the other party leaders in the House representing constituencies in Great Britain seem to find abhorrent?

Has the Secretary of State taken note of the advice given by the Opposition spokesman that the Secretary of State should not seek to impose a solution; but on behalf of the Labour party the hon. Gentleman has made it clear that he would impose a solution without regard to the wishes of anybody?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am grateful for what the right hon. Gentleman has said about Sir Ninian Stephen, which I am sure will be much appreciated, and I am also grateful for what he said about the Government team and about my predecessor.

I entirely agree that the climate has definitely improved. Sitting round the table for six months has led to a marked increase in the understanding of the parties for the positions taken by others and a respect for them, and all of us who have taken part in that recognise it. It has been very marked.

Progress has been made towards a new beginning in relationships both north-south, within Northern Ireland, and east-west. Progress has been made; it is not enough. It has taken six months, but six months in the history of Ireland is but an evening gone. We shall come back to it.

The right hon. Gentleman asked if I would facilitate progress on specific subjects in round-table conversations between the Northern Ireland parties. The British Government are anxious to facilitate any convergence—any area of agreement—in Northern Ireland, but we do not wish to lose sight of our objective of progress towards a new beginning in the totality of relationships. That objective has occupied us over the past six months.

**Rev. Ian Paisley (Antrim, North):** Let me associate myself with what has already been said about Sir Ninian Stephen and his colleague George Thompson, who has assisted him lately. I also echo what has been said about the present Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, his predecessor and his deputy, who made such a valuable contribution to the talks in the conference and at stage 1.

Will the Secretary of State bear in mind what was said by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Mr. McNamara)—that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was imposed on the people of Northern Ireland? It comes ill from the hon. Gentleman to say that nothing should be imposed, and then to say that the Dublin Government should have more say in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman also confirm that, if the southern Government had not asked for the conference, the talks could have continued in spite of the

election? We needed to revert to stage 1, for there was still business to be done, but the southern Government had no place in that.

Will the Secretary of State also bear in mind that, although the other Government said that articles 2 and 3 were on the table, the Taoiseach kept repeating outside the conference that there would be no change? Last weekend, the SDLP spokesman exhorted his supporters to stand firm. The House should face up to the fact that no progress can be made until the Irish Republic gives up its illegal, immoral and criminal claim to the territory of Northern Ireland.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** It is true that the Irish Government asked for a meeting of the intergovernmental conference, as it was quite entitled to do. The last conference met on 27 April; this one will bring the total to four this year. Normally, there are eight on average. Under the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Irish Government were perfectly entitled to ask for such a conference, and I make no complaint about that. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed with the Taoiseach that it should take place. I think that it had a beneficial effect, in that it brought us under the whip for the past couple of weeks. Good progress was made.

Articles 2 and 3 have featured in our discussions, as it was apparent that they would. I welcome the fact that they have been recognised by the Irish Government as being on the table for discussion, along with other constitutional matters. I shall not go into the business of what weight is to be put on which ingredient in the talks, because I do not think that that will help the process of carrying forward the consultations—which, I trust, will begin very soon. I shall merely say that all the participants have, in their various ways, put their backs into this business, and much progress has been made as a result. Many historical watersheds have been encountered, and have been left behind us as we have moved onwards.

**Mr. John Hume (Foyle):** I join other hon. Members in expressing deep appreciation of Sir Ninian Stephen and Mr. George Thompson, who have put incredible effort, energy and dedication into the talks. On behalf of my party, let me also express appreciation of the effort put in by the Secretary of State and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—and by the Dublin Ministers, who came here on a regular basis during strand 2. Six months is a short time in the history of a problem like Ireland. As I said to Sir Ninian Stephen yesterday, the Irish problem existed before his country came into existence. Six months, therefore, is a short time. During that time, I believe that the discussions had very many areas of constructive dialogue and very many areas of agreement, as well as areas of disagreement, but that, in terms of the depth of the divisions in our society, is progress.

I look forward to building on that progress by maintaining contact with the other parties, by dialogue, because dialogue is the only road to the future, and also by working with the other parties on matters of common concern, such as the economy, in order to build up trust and to break down the distrust and prejudice that goes to the heart of our problem.

I ask the Secretary of State to agree that, in summing up the approach of my party to this dialogue, we said that the task which faced us was the accommodation of two sets of

legitimate rights: the rights of the Unionist people to the full expression of their identity and way of life and the rights of the nationalist people to precisely the same—the accommodation of both, not the defeat of one by the other? While that principle is self-evident, and while the Secretary of State can agree that everyone can accept the principle and the reality, when one translates the reality into institutional expression both identities transcend the confines of Northern Ireland. While the three Unionist parties seem to have no difficulty in transcending the confines in the direction of London for the expression of what they describe as their Britishness, they seem to find difficulty in moving in the other direction to allow the nationalist community to have an equal expression of their identity. The Secretary of State knows that we regard that as the major area of disagreement, but we look forward to continuing to discuss that area of disagreement, with a view to coming to an ultimate agreement, because dialogue—no matter what anyone says, and there is no point in recriminations—is the only route to a lasting settlement of our deep-seated problem.

**Madam Speaker:** Before I call the Secretary of State to respond, may I remind the House that we are dealing with a statement? Therefore, hon. Members should be questioning that statement, not making their own comments. That is essential if we are to make progress within the parliamentary framework.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I neglected to express my thanks to the hon. Member for Antrim, North (Rev. Ian Paisley) for what he said, both as to Sir Ninian Stephen and myself.

I am grateful for what the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) said at the beginning of his remarks, and I welcome the thrust of what he said. It is right that the parties have come to acknowledge that one of the principal issues is the question of accommodating differing identities and differing allegiances in Northern Ireland. It is one of the achievements of the process that there has been a widening understanding of a point that he has always regarded as of crucial importance.

Equally, the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that there has been a widening understanding of the position, anxieties and fundamental beliefs of the Unionist side in the process. All that is to the good. The question is not so much whether one acknowledges these differences but how one applies the principle of accommodating them in real, practical reality. That is the question for continuing consultation, based upon what we have built in the last few months. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's commitment to that further process.

**Sir James Kilfedder** (North Down): May I join in the expression of praise and thanks to Sir Ninian Stephen for his patience, tact and skill? He was a distinguished chairman of the talks.

Does not the Secretary of State's opinion, that the objective of the talks remains both valid and achievable, fully justify the Government's commitment to continue with the process of informal discussions? Perhaps he might widen the discussions to include all Northern Ireland's parliamentary parties. Does he realise that the overwhelming majority of the Ulster people, regardless of their religion or politics, and in particular the younger generation, are anxious that Ulster should shake off the shackles of fear, prejudice and hatred and make way for political progress?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I endorse his final remark, but the people of Northern Ireland across the spectrum wish that the past no longer dominates the present and dictates the future. The hon. Gentleman has much more experience of democratic politics in Northern Ireland than I have. Walking about in the streets and going about my business in the Province has brought home to me time and time again that there is a demand from the people of Northern Ireland that we should leave the past behind us. People say, "There are legitimate grievances on each side, but we are fed up with having them recited. We are looking to the future." Of course, that is particularly true of the young. So I stand by what the hon. Gentleman said.

I look forward to the continuation of the discussions. They will need to continue with the same participants with which they were begun. I know that all the participants will benefit from informal advice from the hon. Gentleman, as I have unfailingly done.

**Mr. David Alton** (Liverpool, Mossley Hill): In recognising the common ground as well as the difficulties in Northern Ireland, the talks have been welcomed, and will be welcomed, by all parties and all hon. Members. All hon. Members wish the Secretary of State and others well in the future.

Does the Secretary of State accept that the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland will need to be addressed by people not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the islands? A way of extending the discussion would be, not a *Hansard* such as that suggested earlier, but the publication of a Green Paper setting out the various options that now lie before us. The publication of a Green Paper would enable people to have a proper discussion about the alternatives and the concessions which would have to be made by each of the participants.

Does the Secretary of State agree that he must move from the role of umpire to that of a protagonist and, perhaps, reach further to the ordinary people both north and south of the border in Ireland and put a series of propositions in a referendum in due course to all the people, above the heads of politicians?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his comments. I agree with his comments about a democratic deficit.

Part of my purpose is to bring back to Northern Ireland democratically answerable government which is exercised by the people, elected from the population of Northern Ireland and answerable for final decisions to them. For far too long Northern Ireland has suffered the indignity of being ruled from this House on matters which would normally be within the jurisdiction of a borough or district council. But we must secure the abolition of the democratic deficit on a fair and workable basis. The abolition of that deficit must attract the support of the community. That, in part, is what the discussions are about.

I would rather publish a Green Paper which sets out the ways in which the agreement, once reached, can be implemented; but for the reasons that I have given, there is not much to be gained by publishing a Green Paper before we reach agreement.

**Mr. Tom King** (Bridgwater): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that the announcement that he has made to the House today is disappointing to those of us

[Mr. Tom King]

who have a keen interest in and affection for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? However, we realise that a great deal has been achieved and that the parties involved deserve credit for the discussions that have already taken place. I refuse to believe that the discussions have been a waste of time.

Will my right hon. and learned Friend accept that, although the election in the Republic imposes a certain interim period until a new Government are elected, the parties in this House can take advantage of the interim period to continue the informal discussions in the hope that an opportunity will present itself to carry forward an important development?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I agree with what my right hon. Friend said, and I thank him for his comments. There may be some advantage in the pause or intermission—whatever one may like to call it—that has now occurred in meetings of the intergovernmental conference. The interim period will give an opportunity for ordinary men and women in the street to make their opinions known and inform the political leaders in the Province and the north and south what people think and what they hope will be achieved. I believe that that will happen, and that it will be beneficial. I am grateful for what my right hon. Friend said about how much has been achieved, and I believe that he is right.

**Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone):** In a normal, ideal situation one would agree with the Secretary of State that this is not the time for recriminations. None the less, does he not agree that one party at the table was beyond the normal courtesies in terms of making a substantial contribution—lacking good will, flexibility and, one might say, common sense? That party made not one solitary compromise during the whole period of the discussions.

In so far as that party is joined with Her Majesty's Government, through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, does that not prove the folly of conferring on a Government who lack responsibility the right to interfere in our affairs in Northern Ireland? Instead of listening to the contradictory gobbledegook which we have heard from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), will the Secretary of State consult elected Northern Ireland Members? In terms of their advice and their participation in remedying the democratic deficit, will he give those Members precedence over the Irish Republic, which has proved so reluctant to enter into the spirit which the rest of us tried to inject into the talks?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The elected representatives in Northern Ireland probably have precedence over everybody; they all know—at least, I hope that they do—that they can come to see me about any subject whenever they want, and many of them have done so.

I do not think that I shall follow the hon. Gentleman on his principal point, save to say that if any party has lacked flexibility and movement, no doubt it will be thought that there is all the more scope for movement in the further consultations in which we are about to take part.

**Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East):** May I associate myself with the tributes paid to Sir Ninian Stephen and his assistant, Mr. George Thompson? I add my thanks to the Secretary of State and his predecessor, and to the

Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Richmond and Barnes (Mr. Hanley), for their valuable contribution during the talks, for their commitment and dedication, and for the enthusiasm that they put into the process.

Over the coming weeks and months, as the Secretary of State assesses and analyses the process which has just ended, will he consider not only where the sticking points have been but the basic structure of the talks process and the aspects of it which may have caused this degree of failure? If he concludes, as I have, that some parties at the talks were so content with the status quo—the Anglo-Irish Agreement—that they were not encouraged to move from it, will he consider introducing a level playing field by ending the marginalisation of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland which has been caused by that agreement? That would give any consultations which might take place a better chance.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks. I understand his position and that of his party on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and I understand what he has said about it. The hon. Gentleman believes that there may be less incentive for his political opponents to seek changes such as those we are discussing, because they have an advantage under that agreement. I understand that point.

That is not, with great respect, what we are really concerned with today.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is in force and I reiterate that the British Government will be loyal to it. That said, it was part of the statement of 26 March 1991 by my predecessor that the British Government would seek with the Irish Government, by direct discussion, to discover whether it was possible to agree a new and more broadly based agreement either to supplement or to replace the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That is still very much part of our concerns in the process. It is the subject of strand 3 of the talks. I believe, therefore, that it would be a very desirable outcome and one that we shall work towards.

**Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh):** Tributes have been paid to the Secretary of State, to the Under-Secretary of State, to the chairman and to his assistant. I add to that my tribute to the other parties taking part in the discussions—even those that wish to involve themselves in recrimination today. I sat through every session of the talks except one, so I realise that an enormous amount of effort went into the talks from every party. Some people found it necessary at times to express their positions differently by not actively taking part, and I respect that.

I do not want to answer the recriminations or to involve myself in them except to ask the Secretary of State one question when he considers and ponders the results. Did we not all know when we responded jointly to the invitation from the British Government and from the Irish Government that there would be difficult questions and that there would be issues that we should not be able to resolve easily? Did we not know that one of those would be that Unionists would not become nationalists and nationalists would not become Unionists overnight? May we now take the opportunity in the informal discussions, which I hope will lead to a resumption of formal discussions, to face those problems and difficulties because they will not be wished away, ignored away or talked away? Sooner or later we must face them.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** There is an unearthly unanimity in the way in which right hon. and hon. Members begin their contributions. I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has said.

If we are sensible, we all recognise that the enormously deep-rooted problem will not be solved overnight. It must be solved by the people of Northern Ireland and it must be solved by all those with legitimate interests in the problems of Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman is right about that; I do not think that there is any disagreement about it. I am not depressed, although I am disappointed, that we have not got further and that in a mere six months we have not reached heads of agreement. We have plenty of time and no lack of determination.

**Mr. Barry Porter** (Wirral, South): The longer I am in the House, the more glad I am that I come from the north of England where we tend to use words that mean what they say. If the purpose of the talks was to get an agreement between the parties of Northern Ireland, then I must say that they have failed. It is about time that someone used that word. There is nothing wrong with saying that. I do not believe in political alchemy and I know of no geometrician who has yet squared the circle, as was being attempted. I am glad to know that people will carry on talking. However, they always did, so there is nothing new in that.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there is a formal body in existence, which can be and has shown itself to be an appropriate debating chamber—the Anglo-Irish parliamentary body? I repeat my plea to the Unionists in the Chamber to take their seats on that body. Surely that must be a way forward.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The Anglo-Irish parliamentary body is extremely valuable and I do not doubt it benefits from the plain speaking of my hon. Friend. I always find that Yorkshiremen and those who come from other less favoured counties—

**Mr. Porter:** I am from Lancashire.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** Well, Yorkshiremen in particular and people from other counties which regard themselves as being in the north, never fail to remind us how bluntly they speak. That is also very much appreciated. The AIPB is a very good thing and I wish that the Unionists would take their seats in it. I value the body's reports and hope that it will continue its work.

**Mr. John D. Taylor** (Strangford): The failure of the talks comes as no surprise to most people in Northern Ireland. The failure was inevitable because of the Dublin Government's refusal to change articles 2 and 3 and because of the clear refusal of the SDLP to agree to any form of devolved government based on elections in Northern Ireland.

In view of the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement five years ago—and I am glad to hear, five years too late, that the Labour party spokesman is now against imposed solutions in Northern Ireland—and the stalemate which it has created in Northern Ireland for five years and the fool's errand that devolution now is, will the Secretary of State consider the alternative of giving the people of Northern Ireland the same rights and responsibilities as those enjoyed by their fellow citizens in Scotland, England and Wales?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I understand that there is a desire for much more answerable democratic government of Northern Ireland in Northern Ireland. I have already said that I share that objective. However, I very much share the objective that underlay the whole process, that whatever structures are set up, they shall have the widest possible degree of acceptance across the community. That is very important.

I will not be drawn into a discussion of the merits of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It is there, it remains in force, and the British Government are loyal to it. Many advances have been made in the past few years in the way in which Northern Ireland is governed. I want to see those advances retained and built upon, but on a basis of restored democratic government locally in the Province.

**Mr. James Couchman** (Gillingham): I want to reinforce the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Porter) and invite the Unionists to take their place on the Anglo-Irish parliamentary body. They would make a most valuable contribution to our discussions.

Can my right hon. and learned Friend give us any idea when he might reconvene the talks between all parties? Will he assure the House that it will be a reconvening and that process will not start again from square one?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** What was agreed by the parties yesterday was that, bilaterally, discussions will resume on the basis that they have been going on over the past three or four weeks. We have got away from the strands which were convened. In the first instance, those informal discussions will take place on bilateral initiatives. After that, we must consider how we bring the matter to a conclusion. While I welcome what my hon. Friend says about getting on with it now as quickly as possible, it will not be for me to convene a formal process. It will happen more informally, and I hope as quickly as possible.

**Mr. David Trimble** (Upper Bann): The way in which the talks have ended clearly demonstrates that the diktat imposed on us by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) has been only a stumbling block which will be cured by no supplement and merits only oblivion.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Molyneaux) said, there was considerable progress in the talks within strand 1. However, is it not the case that, once we got into the other strands, the talks rapidly deadlocked on a number of issues with the result that strand 3 never really got off the ground? As there is no likelihood of those deadlocks being resolved, is not the only rational course to go back to the issues addressed in strand 1 and bring them to fruition, thus ending the democratic deficit?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** Certainly there was a lot of progress in strand 1, as has been said. However, there was a lot of convergence also in strand 2. Strand 2 comprises those institutions which will be put in place to affect relationships north-south. A lot of progress was made there, but that has to be a matter primarily for those who are going to work them—political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government. I do not agree that there was no progress there. In strand 3, we certainly held meetings, but it is difficult to make progress on strand 3 until the first two have got a good deal further.

I would not want the hon. Gentleman to think that I agree that there has been no merit in the Anglo-Irish

[Sir Patrick Mayhew]

Agreement. There has been much recognition in recent years that there is a legitimate interest from outside Northern Ireland in some of the affairs that affect nationalists in Northern Ireland. That recognition has grown and it derives from the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Whether it does or does not, that recognition is a very good thing. It is something that has been reflected by all parties in the talks. I do not think that we should allow ourselves to be deflected from the really important business by a discussion of matters that took place a few years ago, let alone discussions of matters that took place perhaps 20, 30 or more years ago.

**Mr. Bill Walker** (Tayside, North): My right hon. and learned Friend will know that many Conservative Members will be disappointed but not surprised at the failure of the talks. Few of us believed that they would succeed, but we wished them well. Whatever decisions are arrived at in the talks in the future—I welcome the fact that the parties are continuing to talk—at the end of the day, as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland continue to say that they wish to remain part of the United Kingdom, this House and this Parliament will determine what happens. We should never ever walk away from that. It is our responsibility—our duty—somehow to find the answer to the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. In fact, the rest of the United Kingdom will suffer as long as that deficit remains.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: I agree with my hon. Friend. Of course it is the responsibility of the House to govern the affairs of Northern Ireland as long as Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom. That is expressly recognised in the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

**Mr. Roy Beggs** (Antrim, East): Most hon. Members will feel warmed when they hear from the Secretary of State that progress has been made, but people outside the House want to know what progress has been made. On their behalf, I ask the Secretary of State whether the intransigence of the Irish Government and the insurmountability of the Anglo-Irish Agreement have prevented real progress in the talks to date.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: I have tried to make it clear, and I hope that, when the hon. Gentleman reads the record, he will see the areas in which I consider that there has been agreement. Perhaps rather more important is the opinion of the independent chairman that quite substantial agreement has been made—not enough, but quite a lot. I do not think that I will help the hon. Gentleman by going over it. I am not going to follow him into recriminations of one party or another in the talks; that will not help us. I believe that we should be getting on, and I hope that he believes that we should be getting on. I do not think that we shall get on if we start pointing the finger at one participant or another.

**Mr. Stuart Bell** (Middlesbrough): Does the Secretary of State accept that there are great opportunities at this time for all those who live on the island of Ireland with the Single European Act coming into force on 1 January, the prospects of enhanced trade and the prospects of enhanced employment?

Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman recognise the consensus in the House that the British-Irish

inter-parliamentary body represents a forum of dialogue, co-operation and consultation that helps to unite people north and south, east and west, of these islands? May I make an appeal to Unionist Members? There are seats available for them. They would take their seats with a great welcome from the House because it would be fully in line with the traditions of democracy and freedom in Northern Ireland and the consultation and co-operation that they are seeking with the Parliament of the Republic and the Parliament of Westminster.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: I very much agree with the relevance of what the hon. Gentleman said about the Single European Act. That Act opens up prospects for much greater trade, north-south; it is surprising how little there has been until very recently. Trade and a strong economy lead to the kind of stability which is the best insurance against toleration for terrorism. That is the relevance of what has been said, just as the business that we have been engaged in over the last six months is relevant to the defeat of terrorism, which is the Government's overriding objective. I endorse what the hon. Gentleman says about the Anglo-Irish parliamentary body.

**Mr. Jim Marshall** (Leicester, South): The only agreement that appears to have been reached throughout the talks is the unanimity of view that the talks were chaired well by officials or politicians.

Moving to the substance of the Secretary of State's report to the House, first, will he confirm that any overall agreement can be attained only with the consent of the Government in Dublin? Secondly, he said that he would not like to see published a blow-by-blow account of the talks. I agree, because it would make public the divisions which clearly exist. But the Secretary of State says in his statement that the participants

"have identified and discussed most, if not all, of the elements which would comprise an eventual settlement".

If that is so, does not he agree that those elements should be made public so that there could be a wider public discussion of them? That would not itself prejudice any future talks between the internal parties in Northern Ireland.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew**: The hon. Gentleman says that hon. Members seem to recognise only one area of agreement—that the process was chaired well. I am happy to accept that. We have to begin somewhere. He asked whether we should publish the areas where we say that there has been discussion of the basic elements. The point is that everybody agreed at the beginning that nothing should be agreed until all was agreed. It may be that people at the preliminary stage said, "We could agree with this or that, provided the other." I do not think that that process would be brought to crystallisation and agreement if there were to be publication now of what has taken place. I know that it is disappointing for those who take great interest in these matters, but that I believe to be the view of all who participated in the talks.

**Mr. Eddie McGrady** (South Down): Does the Secretary of State agree that it was the existence and the workings of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which were the conduit which brought the otherwise distant parties together around the table? Does he further agree that the talks would be continuing to this very day if certain parties, for very good

reasons of their own, had not withdrawn from the process? We could have been talking next week if that had not happened.

I share the Secretary of State's optimism and confidence for the future. I should like to think that, notwithstanding what I hope will be a short recess, the mechanisms of getting together would be facilitated by him and by the parties in order to bring all three strands, which are so intertwined, to a successful conclusion.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I am very anxious, as I know the hon. Gentleman is aware, to do anything I can to get this thing going and moving in the right direction. Nobody is less inclined to stand upon formality than me, so he has that assurance.

I will not take up what the hon. Gentleman said earlier. I was described by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Mossley Hill (Mr. Alton) as an umpire. I do not think I am an umpire, but certainly an umpire does not get drawn into supporting one side or the other in a conflict, and I do not propose to do so.

**Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North):** Is it not a fact that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was approved in the House by an overwhelming majority of hon. Members on both sides? The Unionist parties, of course, recognise the sovereignty of Parliament as regards Northern Ireland. As to the parliamentary body, there has been a remarkable breakthrough in that British and Irish parliamentarians have sat down together in the full body and in sub-committees over the past two years.

In view of the interest of a number of European countries, and now the United States, in the talks or in what may take place in Northern Ireland in future, is the Secretary of State willing, on behalf of the Government, for those Governments which are so interested, including the new Administration in the United States, to come to Northern Ireland so that they may see for themselves that we have absolutely nothing to hide?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I agree warmly with the hon. Gentleman. I encourage visits from all over the world, and when visitors come there is an almost uniform result. They say, "We had no idea that the media image was so wide of the mark." The Southern Legislative Conference of American States—senators and congressmen from the southern states—is the most recent example. They spent the thick end of a week in Northern Ireland, and at the end of their stay they said, "We are going back to America to do our best to correct the image, which we regard as unrecognisable." That is so. As far as I am concerned, anyone who wants to go to Northern Ireland, from whatever quarter and with whatever prejudice, is welcome. I shall see to it that they have a fair view of Northern Ireland, and that they are free to go wherever they like and to talk to whoever they like, and they will come away wiser and, I trust, happier people.

**Mr. Harry Barnes (Derbyshire, North-East):** Were the talks exclusively concerned with constitutional, political and security matters or were economic and social affairs discussed, as the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Molyneux) seemed to suggest? One way to tackle the situation in Northern Ireland and to undermine sectarianism is to make progress in dealing with the unemployment, deprivation and poverty which exist there and throughout the island of Ireland.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I assure the hon. Gentleman that they were included. During those six months there were times when I thought that nothing under the sun was excluded. The extremely important matters that he mentioned were certainly included, for the reason that he identified. Economic strength and the elimination of deprivation and disadvantage, wherever they may be found, are important in their own right, and to inculcate stability. That is why the British Government are so anxious to target areas of social need—as we do—and to target areas such as Belfast and Londonderry, where financial help can get businesses and employment going. That is why the MacBride principles, which are espoused in certain areas of the United States, are so deeply damaging because they are destructive of jobs, and that is why they are opposed by every constitutional party in Northern Ireland and supported only by Sinn Féin.

**Ms. Kate Hoey (Vauxhall):** I am sure that the majority of people in Northern Ireland would agree with what the Secretary of State said about looking to the future and not to the past and not recriminating about what has gone on. Does he agree that in the foreseeable future Northern Ireland will stay part of the United Kingdom and that during that time the people there should be treated in the same way as the rest of the citizens in the kingdom? Why does he not agree to set up a Select Committee on Northern Ireland immediately?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The hon. Lady is right to say that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom in the foreseeable future—as long as the majority of people living there wish to do so. If they change their minds, it will cease to be a part of the United Kingdom. That has been made perfectly clear for many years.

The hon. Lady asks about a Select Committee. I remind her that, in their response to the report of the Procedure Committee, the Government said that they had no objection to such a Select Committee—provided that setting it up met with the approval of the House—but that it would have to have the support of the broad community in Northern Ireland.

**Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover):** Is it not rather strange that along comes the ex-Attorney General, Mr. Smoothie, who could have said all he needed to say in a few sentences? The Government's policies have failed. They have gone down the pan, but he is trying to kid us along that somehow everything remains the same. The truth is that we need a new political initiative in Ireland, and that is to get the troops out. I intervened when the Secretary of State talked about convergence because he could not get convergence between two nation states. What chance has he got in Maastricht with 12 nation states?

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** The hon. Gentleman has lost his form since I used to see him off over Attorney-General's questions; he is out of practice. The British Government do not adopt what he calls the "troops out" policy because we have more concern for the real interests of ordinary people in Northern Ireland than he could ever begin to understand.

**Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Port Glasgow):** It may be of little moment, but some hon. Members believe that the Anglo-Irish Agreement should have been entitled the British-Irish Agreement.



[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

Although it is reassuring to hear the Secretary of State say that the Government hold to the view that there can be no agreement other than a comprehensive agreement by all the parties and that therefore the Government will never seek to impose a change on Northern Ireland, will he assure me that that message will be conveyed to Washington? Will he further assure me that President-elect Clinton will be most carefully apprised of the current circumstances surrounding those talks? Surely the days of the American interventionist role in Europe are coming to an end.

**Sir Patrick Mayhew:** I have been rather grateful, as have most people in this country, for the concern which the Americans have shown in the past 45 years for our affairs here in Europe. However, we must distinguish between what is said in the heat of a hotly contested election campaign and what is likely to be the considered policy of a great ally of this country and a great nation. As I have said, the more people come to see what Northern Ireland is really like, the better. But it is important that they should realise that we need not so much a peace envoy as agreement in the process of constitutional talks now engaging us, which the whole House supports.

## Points of Order

4.37

**Mr. Ray Powell (Ogmore):** On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I assume that you will shortly be holding a ballot for notices of motions for 27 November. I know that you are busy and must give a tremendous amount of thought to all the processes in the House. May I remind you, however, that last Wednesday you announced the names of those who were successful in the ballot for Friday 20 November. Last Wednesday we debated further the European Communities Bill. I expect that most hon. Members will remember that day. My name appeared in column 280 of the *Official Report* of 4 November as the first to be selected in the ballot for 20 November. In recent months, some Opposition Members have accused me of ballot rigging. I should not like anyone to suggest or imply that I have been responsible for rigging this ballot in any way.

In the blue pages of the Order Paper for 4 November, page 1179 reads:

"Mr. Ray Powell . . . To call attention to a subject and to move a resolution".

On 5 November, I received a letter from the Table Office informing me that I had been drawn first in the ballot of 4 November for Private Members' Notices of Motions and that, to have priority under Standing Order No. 13, I was requested to give notice of the subject before the rising of the House on Wednesday 11 November—today. Yesterday afternoon, I took the opportunity to give notice of the subject that I intend to move on 20 November. The subject was "the fear, plight and poverty of pensioners".

When I put that to the Table Office, there was no suggestion that there had been any change or mistake about who had come first in the ballot for 20 November. Then, at near to midnight when I was in my room, the Clerk from the Table Office called to inform me that I did not have the number one spot for notice of motions for Friday 20 November, but that the hon. Member for Norfolk, North (Ralph Howell) did.

My point of order to you, Madam Speaker, is that six clear days elapsed between when I was informed of the change and when you announced from the Chair, and all Opposition Members believed, that I was first in the ballot for 20 November. I had been assured that the maximum publicity would centre on the important subject that I had chosen, especially this year. The local and national—

**Madam Speaker:** Order. It is not a matter for me.

**Mr. Powell:** But it is for you, Madam Speaker, to rule on the matter. There is no one else whom I can approach. My office has sent out publicity to pensioners' organisations throughout the country highlighting the problems and difficulties for pensioners, particularly now just before the onset of winter. Many pensioners are worried and fear that they will not be able to pay their bills, and are concerned about what will happen if they become homeless. As a result of the strong-arm tactics of the Whips Office last week that we read about—

**Madam Speaker:** Order. I want to hear no more about the Whips Office from a man who was himself a Whip. I can rule on the matter as the hon. Gentleman is now addressing the subject rather than speaking about technical matters.