

Northern Ireland

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement about recent developments in Northern Ireland, and the declaration issued over the weekend by the Provisional IRA.

On 11 February, I took the decision to suspend the political institutions which had been established barely 10 weeks earlier under the Good Friday agreement. I did so reluctantly, for reasons with which the House is familiar. If I had not done so, there would not only have been a collapse of the institutions, but a total collapse of confidence within Unionism, from which the political process would not have been able to recover for a very long time.

From that moment in February, we and the Irish Government have worked closely, at all levels, to restore the situation. As at so many crucial points in the past, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Irish Taoiseach have committed time and energy on a scale that must be unprecedented for busy Heads of Government. I have kept in close touch with the Irish Foreign Minister. There have been intensive discussions with the parties, in the most constructive atmosphere. I would like to thank officials in both Governments whose efforts have been tireless.

Our aim has been to achieve the clarity about the IRA's intentions which was noticeably lacking in February; by doing so to rebuild Unionist confidence; and thereby to re-establish the institutions. This could not be done quickly. Suspension was a bruising experience for all concerned. Unionists were disappointed that expectations raised during Senator Mitchell's review were not fulfilled. Republicans, and indeed many nationalists, saw great symbolic significance in a British Secretary of State acting to suspend local institutions as I did. People of good will on all sides were saddened that arrangements which had promised so much had proved impossible to sustain.

If Unionists need the confidence that the IRA are genuinely committed to the path of peace and willing to put their arms beyond use, republicans for their part need to know that the vision which the agreement offers, of a just and equal society in which both traditions are respected, will actually be realised.

We and the Irish Government therefore drew up an account of the remaining steps necessary to secure the full implementation of the agreement. Details were communicated to the parties on Saturday morning and I am placing a copy in the Library. The two Governments believe that those steps can be achieved by June 2001. In a statement published on Friday evening, we have committed ourselves to that goal.

The two Governments also called on the paramilitaries to state clearly and urgently that they will put their arms beyond use. For our part, we, the British Government, indicated that such statements would constitute a clear reduction in the security threat. In response, subject to assessment of the threat at the time, further substantial measures to normalise security arrangements will be taken by June 2001.

I am not yet able to say what initial measures will be taken. The Chief Constable is considering, in consultation with the Army, the situation in the light of the IRA

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statement, with a view to what might be done now, and then in the period ahead if and when the threat diminishes. I assure the House though, as I have done before, that the security of the public will continue to be my highest priority. There is no question of trading essential security interests for political progress. But equally there is no doubt that the statements of the kind I have described impact positively on the assessment of the security threat.

As the House will know, the IRA made such a statement on Saturday afternoon. In the context of the Governments' implementing what they have agreed, the IRA committed itself to

a process that will completely and verifiably put arms beyond use.

Not "maybe", not "might", but "will". The IRA statement went on:

We will do it in such a way as to avoid risk to the public and misappropriation by others and ensure maximum confidence.

In the same context, the IRA committed itself to

pursue our political objectives by peaceful means.

The statement further committed the IRA to resume contact with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, under General John de Chastelain. It noted that the IRA's arms are "silent and secure", and that there is no threat to the peace process from the IRA.

In addition, the statement committed the IRA to putting in place within weeks a confidence-building measure to confirm that its weapons remain secure. Independent inspectors will scrutinise a number of arms dumps and report to the de Chastelain commission. It will be an on-going process, with regular reinspections of those dumps.

It is important that we now hear, in similar terms, from the main loyalist organisations.

Since the IRA made its statement, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have announced that Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, the former President of Finland, and Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, the former Secretary General of the African National Congress and now a prominent business man in South Africa—both of them widely respected international figures—have agreed to head the inspections. I am pleased to be able to announce that they will pay their first visit to Belfast next Monday, and I am grateful to them for their speedy response at such short notice.

I regard the IRA statement as a very significant development. For the first time, there is a commitment to put weapons completely and verifiably beyond use, in a context that is realistic rather than simply aspirational. There is a real prospect of actually achieving decommissioning: it is no

longer a matter just of talking about it, or of setting conditions for it that make its realisation less likely.

There is a more clear-cut assurance of the IRA's peaceful intentions than we have ever heard before. As an earnest of those intentions, there is an unprecedented willingness to allow independent third parties to inspect arms dumps containing weapons, explosives and detonators and vouch for their continuing security. An essential element of the scheme is that the process should be continuous, to provide reassurance that dumps have not been tampered with, and that weapons have not been removed, between inspections.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has acknowledged the significance of the IRA statement, and the fact that it appears to break new ground. Not

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surprisingly, he wishes to examine it carefully, and weigh its implications. That is entirely understandable. The right hon. Gentleman will also want to be confident, as I will, that, in moving forward with the agreement, the traditions and concerns of the Unionist people will be respected and dealt with sensitively, every bit as much as the traditions and concerns of nationalists.

I believe that all friends and supporters of responsible forward-looking Unionism will conclude that the proposals that I have outlined today, buttressed by the weekend's statement by the IRA, provide the conditions on which the right hon. Member for Upper Bann can lead his party back into government, confident that their long-standing and proper concerns have been addressed.

On the basis of such a positive response to these proposals, not only from the right hon. Gentleman's party but from all the pro-agreement parties, I can confirm to the House that I will bring forward the necessary order to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly and its Executive by 22 May.

In this event, I feel hopeful and confident that the ultimate prize—stable, inclusive government in Northern Ireland and an unbreakable peace—will at long last be within our grasp.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): In light of the developments in Northern Ireland over the weekend, I know that I speak for the whole House in saying to the Secretary of State that we are very grateful that at the first possible opportunity he has come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement. I endorse what the right hon. Gentleman has said—the statement issued by the Provisional IRA at lunchtime on Saturday is significant. It is worth recalling that never before have they said that they will put arms and explosives completely beyond use and have that verified. Naturally, we welcome this significant development.

The Secretary of State will not be surprised to know, however, that we have concerns, reservations and questions which I would like to put to him this afternoon. Those reservations are not least because we have all of us, the right hon. Gentleman included, had our fingers burned in the past. We thought that we had an understanding last November/December that if the right hon. Gentleman set up an Executive, within a matter of weeks the Provisional IRA would start decommissioning its illegally held arms and explosives. Sadly, the people of Northern Ireland were let down. That did not happen, and the Secretary of State had no choice but to suspend the Executive.

My first point is that we need guarantees that the arms and explosives will be permanently put

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Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his endorsement of my assessment of the IRA's weekend statement. That is the starting point and cornerstone of all the steps and further moves that I have described this afternoon.

The point at the heart of all the right hon. Gentleman's questions was whether we can trust the Provisional IRA, take it at its word and rely on that word. It has been said that IRA statements—even at their most unwelcome and bloody—have a sort of rugged honesty about them. That has been shown in the past, as my predecessor and previous Ministers could testify. While I firmly believe that we must always be on our guard and must always look ahead and test and evaluate statements rather than taking what people say at face value, my judgment is that, taken in the round and given the background of considerable efforts and difficulties from which the statement emerged, it can be relied upon. That does not mean to say that we should take anything for granted. I think that I have shown myself to be anything other than an easy touch for the republican movement in Northern Ireland, and I do not intend to become one now.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several specific questions. He must understand that the confidence-building measure is a first stage towards making arms safe

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and secure. The next stage, which must follow—this is what the decommissioning process is all about—is for those arms to be completely and verifiably put beyond use. The confidence-building measure paves the way for that and builds up to it. The main process must follow, and the Provisional IRA now says that we have a political context and a backcloth of institutions that will function once more against which it can pursue the process of putting arms completely and verifiably beyond use.

I gather that there will be several substantial dumps of weaponry, explosives and detonators. Obviously, the inspection of those dumps is a matter for those whom we have nominated, and not for me. I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that a robust and dependable process will be put in place in consultation with the inspectors who will work closely alongside General de Chastelain's commission to make sure that monitoring and scrutiny are replete and adequate for the task.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several questions about sanctions and about what we should do if it all goes wrong. I have addressed those questions in the past, and I am not blind to them now. I can only say that I am not planning for failure, but if a further political crisis is sparked in circumstances that it is not possible for me to foresee, those responsible for that crisis will be clear for everyone to see. I shall of course, at the end of the day, always ensure the good government of Northern Ireland and will take any measures necessary to secure it.

As far as normalisation measures and security are concerned, I do not act except on the advice of the Chief Constable—primarily—who in turn consults the General Officer Commanding of the Army. That has always been the case and it always will be.

Finally, the whole point of the Good Friday agreement was to enshrine the principle of consent, and

for the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom to be recognised and respected while a majority in Northern Ireland wish it. That is the kernel of the Good Friday agreement, along with principles of fairness and parity of esteem. Those principles are robust and enduring. The measures and policies that we pursue will reflect those important principles at the heart of the Good Friday agreement.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): The Secretary of State, in his statement itself, has acknowledged that we are being properly cautious in our approach to the developments of the weekend—in particular, the IRA statement. While it appears to break new ground, there are still matters that should be probed. Until we get sufficiently satisfactory answers on those and related matters, it would be premature to make a decision on this matter.

I think that the Secretary of State is also aware of our very firm view that the progress that there has been would not have been achieved but for suspension in February. Had there not been suspension in February, we would not have seen this happen. It was my own clear view that the evidence—of actions rather than words—clearly is that the republican movement only moves under pressure. That is a lesson that we hope has now been learned.

Like the Secretary of State, we take the view that the most significant part of the IRA statement is that passage in which they say they will initiate

a process that will completely and verifiably put arms beyond use.

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I should like the Secretary of State to confirm that it is the Government's view that the process there referred to—the process that will completely put arms beyond use—is, in fact, decommissioning, and that it is decommissioning in consultation with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning and decommissioning in accordance with the legislation and the schemes. In that context, will the Secretary of State expand on the reference in the statement issued by the Government on Friday evening in which they said that they were inviting the international commission to consider amendments to the schemes? Will the Secretary of State tell us what provisions he has in mind and whether they would involve any change to the basic principles set out in the legislation?

The Secretary of State also referred to confidence- building measures that the IRA said it would undertake within weeks. Can we have it again confirmed that it is the Government's view that those confidence- building measures are of a transitional nature; that they are not the end result itself, but a transition—part of a process leading to decommissioning in the proper sense?

The Secretary of State will also know that it is very much our desire that this process should succeed and that we should see devolution restored—provided that it is done on a sound basis—and that, irrespective of whatever decision he may make with regard to the restoration of devolution, my party will make its own decision as to what role it will play in future institutions: this party's decision will always be its own decision, and should it consider that, at any point in the future, there is a failure by republicans to carry out the process, it will act accordingly.

Finally, I underline the comments of Secretary of State that, having heard from the republican movement, it is now essential that we hear from loyalist paramilitaries. We hope that they can—as

they have done in the past—improve upon what the IRA has offered.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—not just for echoing my comments about the loyalist paramilitary organisations; I think that all Members of the House will join him in expressing that sentiment. Of course, I respect, have always respected and will always respect the position and the right of his party to consider what it believes it necessary to do in the interests both of those who support his party and of society in Northern Ireland as a whole. I readily acknowledge that that is how he is motivated.

I do not want to dwell on the past or to return to the issue of suspension; that is far too painful. I think that the lessons that the right hon. Gentleman described have probably been learned by everyone. On holding people's feet to the fire, no one can touch him in that regard and everyone will have heard what he said about putting pressure on others. Although pressure is sometimes unwelcome, it is none the less frequently necessary to maintain it.

The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the confidence-building measure. Yes, it is a start not an end; it is the beginning of the process and stage 1. Further stages must follow. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am not in the business of trying to announce deadlines at this stage as to when the process should finish. We have done that in the past and it got us precisely nowhere, so I am not going to try it again. None the less, the process must be on-going.

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The right hon. Gentleman asked me specifically about the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997. The point that he referred to in the Government statement of Friday night was simply that, if anyone wishes to make fresh proposals for new decommissioning schemes that they think are preferable to those already on the table, both Governments will consider them urgently. The whole point of any such scheme would be to maximise the latitude open to the decommissioning body to fulfil its objectives—nothing more and nothing less.

I do not propose to introduce any amendments to the 1997 Act. It set out four options for decommissioning arms, but provided for more to be created if necessary. It also says that arms can be destroyed or made permanently inaccessible or permanently unusable, and that gives us enough breadth and scope for action to proceed without amending the legislation.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The statement is most welcome. My right hon. Friend will know that I supported him fully on the suspension of the Executive and I now support him on its re-establishment now that circumstances are dramatically different. However, would it not help in putting arms, iron bars and other weapons beyond use if, over the next year, movement were made so that exiles are no longer kept out of Northern Ireland by paramilitaries, but are allowed to return home and feel that it is safe to do so because estates in certain areas are no longer run and dominated by paramilitary groups? If there are moves in that direction in the next year, we might have everything established fully by June 2001.

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Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who touches on a good point that I referred to in a speech that I made in Belfast this morning, before I came to the House. If ceasefires are to be worth anything and are to live up to their name, and if the term "peaceful means" is to mean what it says, paramilitary beatings, shootings and the rest of it must be out now, and once and for all if we are to build the decent civic society that we all want in Northern Ireland. That applies to the use of threats against exiles as well. All that has got to go and it has got to end; it must be part of the past 30 years of conflict that we are finally leaving behind us.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Secretary of State agree that the IRA's statement, and especially its willingness to re-establish contact with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, shows that those of us in the House who stuck by the process throughout without imposing extra conditions or seeking to do so probably did the right thing? Does he think, as I do, that the IRA's comment that

there is no threat to the peace process from the IRA,

while circumstantial, none the less represents a significant step forward in terms of the organisation's willingness to participate in the process? In that context, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he believes that the statements of the two Governments on human rights and equality of opportunity suggest that the whole process is on the move? That has to be welcomed.

I am interested in the Secretary of State's view on the June 2001 timetable. Will he confirm that he believes, as I do, that that timetable is more circumspect and

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thought-out than the 22 May 2000 deadline, having been more fully debated by the people who can actually deliver the decommissioning result? We might therefore be more optimistic about June 2001.

Finally, does the Secretary of State concur that this is a real development, and one most definitely needed by the process? If seen through by all the parties in Northern Ireland—as I sincerely hope it will—it should, by rights, enable the Secretary of State to re-establish something that we all want, and that is the governance of Northern Ireland by politicians in Northern Ireland by 22 May.

Mr. Mandelson: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the support and insight that he has brought to all our debates which are rooted in his upbringing and education in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that people would have been better advised to stick by the process. Most have done so. However, over the weekend, one or two people tried to pour cold water over developments in Northern Ireland in the past 72 hours. I do not see many of them here this afternoon, so perhaps their cold water is becoming a little tepid and their scepticism is not borne out.

The Government will pursue all parts of the Good Friday agreement with vigour and enthusiasm over

the coming year. Implementing all aspects of the agreement over the coming year will involve a tough, demanding and exacting timetable for us. That is the essential political context in which we can see further welcome moves in the process of decommissioning from the Provisional IRA. I certainly believe that what is happening now is only a start, but it is better to make a start than to worry so much about the finish that we never make a start in the first place.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): Is the Secretary of State aware that the development justifies his decision in February to suspend the institutions, controversial though that might have been? Is he aware that it is welcome news if weapons are to be verifiably deactivated? If carried through fully, that development should lead to a lasting settlement.

In view of past disappointments, it is important that the House and Government are clear about what is on offer. Is it total or partial decommissioning? Does a substantial number of dumps mean all the dumps or something substantially less than all available weapons? When will active examination of the dumps begin and what does the Secretary of State hope will be concluded by the deadline of June 2001? Will he elaborate to the House on any price that he feels the IRA might attach to the offer? What does the IRA mean by full implementation of the Belfast agreement? If, as I suspect that it might, that involves further movement by the Government on security or other issues, is the Secretary of State aware that that deserves support, provided that such movement is synchronised with, and does not precede, the IRA's movement on beginning to put arms beyond use.

From the outset, this has been a long trail. There may yet be setbacks in a process of this nature. However, this weekend's statement has brought hope back to Belfast. I hope that past enmities and distrust will not disguise the opportunity that now seems to lie at hand.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, whose words will be welcome across the

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community in Northern Ireland, not least because no one knows more about that long trail, as he calls it, than he does.

May I first take up the right hon. Gentleman's final point about the price being paid? I am eternally vigilant about the price that has to be paid for such moves, and I am especially vigilant on the subject of security normalisation. There is absolutely no question that we shall do anything other than respond to changes and reductions in the security threat; we are not carrying out measures of security normalisation in order to procure political change. That is the important principle. As I said in my statement, I believe that it is possible for us to move ahead with some initial measures, and I know that the Chief Constable is currently considering those measures. However, what lies ahead and what further progress we make must rely on our assessment of the security threat as it develops and as it manifests itself on the ground at that moment. I hope that everyone has heard those three very important qualifications.

As for the confidence-building measures, it is important to distinguish between initial measures to make arms safe and secure, which the IRA says it will undertake, and the continuing, subsequent process of decommissioning—or, as the right hon. Gentleman says, deactivating. I think that it was he who first introduced the term "decommissioning", and he has now introduced a new term, "deactivating"; That is a rather smart and appropriate term to use, and I shall borrow it henceforward.

As for CBMs—the opening and verifying of the dumps—the two inspectors, Mr. Ahtisaari and Mr. Ramaphosa, will visit Belfast next Monday. All the technical detail has to wait until they come and we have that discussion with them. They will go through all that with General de Chastelain and his colleagues, in consultation with the Government, and I do not want to pre-empt or anticipate how they will do that. All I will say is that I know that Mr. Ahtisaari has considerable experience of these matters in the Balkans, most recently in Kosovo, and there have been similar situations with similar needs that have been addressed in the past; therefore, I do not think that it will be impossible for us to devise the precise arrangements and technical details that are needed.

As for what I hope we have achieved by June 2001—total, partial, on-the-way or two-thirds decommissioning—I really do not want to predict or speculate at this stage. All I know is that unless that process continues and it is enduring, reliable and robust, there will always be the danger of confidence running out of the political process, as it did previously. That is the last thing that we need and it would be a crying shame if it did occur. I hope and assume that everyone who has responsibility for making progress in these matters will do so, so that confidence is maintained, not only for the immediate future, but for always.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware of my pessimism following his decision to suspend the Executive. I am pleased to admit that my pessimism seems to have been confounded, and I wish to join in the congratulations to him, to both Governments and to the parties on the hard work that they have done that has enabled this weekend's statement to be made.

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What is especially important is that all parties appear to have recognised that there was a ceasefire, not a victory or a defeat for either side; and that therefore there is now no ultimatum or fixed date. In the past, those hoops have been raised by various people from time to time, and people felt that the IRA had to jump through them. The fact that they no longer exist, coupled with the IRA's statement, gives great cause for hope.

I conclude by wishing the right hon. Members for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) courage and good heart during the very difficult negotiations that they will have with their own party.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has not only shown recent pessimism about the situation but has demonstrated a colossal commitment over many years to getting under way the peace process which we now see culminating, I hope, in success. My hon. Friend is right. If there were any connotations of surrender or defeat or other people being victorious, forget it—we would get absolutely nowhere. That is why we must be so careful about the language that we use and the tone that we adopt when we talk about these matters. All the time, whether Unionists are coming into the devolved institutions or paramilitary organisations are decommissioning, all those are voluntary acts. We are persuading people and creating the conditions and circumstances in which they will follow and go with each other along a virtuous path. That is why my hon. Friend's point is so valid. We are not asking people to jump through hoops. We are asking them to live up to their word and to others' expectations of them. That is what we must hope and assume will be the case in the months and years to come.

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Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Since, of the 14 places where Robert the Bruce is said to have had his famous encounter with the spider, the BBC commends Rathlin island off the North Antrim coast, may I start by congratulating the Government on having followed Robert the Bruce's example? May I also ask the Secretary of State to clarify an aspect of the expansion of the international inspection? One of the new international inspectors shares nationality with a member of the de Chastelain commission, but the other does not. If the process of inspection is to be continuous, how does the Secretary of State envisage that the second international inspector will be able to carry out that inspection?

Mr. Mandelson: I do not think that the inspectors' respective nationalities will be such a relevant factor or a hindrance for either or both of them. However, the right hon. Gentleman touches on a good point about the relationship. Let me make this clear. We are asking the former President of Finland, who has considerable experience and current activity in relation to international crises and conflict resolution to carve out of his diary at very short notice a considerable commitment of time. I do not want to put him off by rehearsing in advance what the task will involve, but we are looking to those individuals to come and spend at least a couple of days at a time on each inspection that they undertake, which will continue for some time to come. Suffice it to say that I think they know what they are letting themselves in for—at least I hope they do, or rather I hope that they do not know too much of what

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they are letting themselves in for. None the less, both are very committed, and they will be able to draw on the considerable expertise that has already been built up in General de Chastelain's commission from the three commissioners who work in that body. I have absolute confidence that they will be able to work well together, in the initial stages on the confidence-building measures, as the decommissioning body takes on the further responsibility for supervising the decommissioning process in the longer term.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Speaker: Order. I should be obliged if I could now have brisk questions and answers. Many hon. Members are still standing, and there is another major statement to come before we get on to our main business.

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): My right hon. Friend's statement is unreservedly welcome. Does he agree that the unprecedented IRA statement that we are discussing represents the best and possibly the last chance of delivering peace to Northern Ireland under the present peace process? Does he further agree that to oppose it without good cause is tantamount to opposing peace itself?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. I am tempted to say that we should not look a gift horse in the mouth. It is right to question the statement, to probe it and to see what is there behind the smile, but having done all that, which I do not hesitate to do, I hope that at the end of the day, people will embrace it for what it is. It may not yet be perfect in every respect, but for now, it is as good as it gets.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Does the Secretary of State accept that all who have contributed to creating the environment that has allowed him to make this encouraging statement today should be commended? Given that many of us agree with his analysis that we need to build confidence and trust, does he recognise that that would be facilitated if the initial verification visits were regular—indeed, frequent—and the results of each published at the time?

Mr. Mandelson: The inspectors of the dumps are committed to doing whatever is needed to ensure that their remit is properly fulfilled. As for the reports of the de Chastelain decommissioning body, the Governments have given a commitment to publish them fully and promptly in future. I personally attach great importance to that.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Has my right hon. Friend noticed that, while the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) had the decency, good sense and honesty to remark that similar moves should be made by Unionist paramilitaries, no speaker from the official Opposition has referred to that aspect of the problem? Does he agree that it would be constructive if Opposition Members would refer to it?

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend speaks of loyalist, not Unionist paramilitaries. I entirely endorse her sentiment,

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but I believe that the comments to which she refers have been made by the Opposition. I have no doubt that the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) shares my desire for loyalist paramilitaries to follow up and reflect what the Provisional IRA said over the weekend.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): We are discussing a statement not by Sinn Fein but by the IRA. That is a breakthrough in itself. However, there must be some clarification. For example, the IRA has said that it will put arms beyond use. That means that it could put 5 per cent. of its illegal arms beyond use and retain the other 95 per cent. of its arsenal to continue terrorism in the island of Ireland. Will there be some guarantee that all the illegal arms that are currently in the hands of the IRA will be brought under control in some way and that the process is on-going?

Much though we want the normalisation of policing and security, will the Secretary of State assure the people of Northern Ireland not only that the role of the Provisional IRA will be considered, but that the on-going threat from the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA will be a factor in making decisions?

The Belfast agreement placed an obligation on the Dublin Government to create a Human Rights Commission in accordance with the European convention on human rights. We have anxieties about the treatment of minorities in the Republic; that is why we got the requirement written into the Belfast agreement. Two years have passed; will the Secretary of State tell us when it will happen?

I commend the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for their contribution to the on-going process.

Mr. Mandelson: I am glad to say that, in the joint statement, the Irish Government said that it would establish a Human Rights Commission and introduce legislation shortly.

On the dissidents to whom the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) correctly draws attention, I shall highlight another paragraph in the joint statement that the Governments issued on Friday. It is important to note that they pledged themselves to taking all and any effective measures necessary for dealing with continuing terrorist activity and threat from dissident paramilitary individuals and organisations. We shall step up our measures as well as our vigilance. It is important to do that in full co-operation with the security forces of the Irish Republic.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the IRA was talking about all or part of its arms. I have no hesitation in saying that our requirement and my expectation is that all the arms will be placed under the sort of control to which he referred. We are talking about "completely and verifiably": we are talking not about "somewhat", "sometime", "perhaps" or "if", but "will completely and verifiably". In the unlikely but theoretically possible circumstances of the Provisional IRA ceasefire being broken, its breach would be clear for all to see and judge. That would mean that it was impossible for the political representatives of the republican movement to remain active participants in the democratic institutions that we are creating.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I was struck by the fact that the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) said that the IRA's statement is

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a breakthrough. I welcome the early re-institution of the Executive and the Assembly, but, in relation to my right hon. Friend's comments on initial decisions on the security front, a fine confidence-building response would be to order the early demolition of the Barouki tower, known as the crow's nest, in Crossmaglen square. That ugly blot on the townscape serves no useful security purpose, which is a point that I have made to the Chief Constable himself.

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend wrote to me recently, following his visit to South Armagh, about one or more of the installations which, in his opinion, are particularly intrusive. I have considered his comments and brought them to attention of those who are responsible, but I must make it absolutely clear that I shall not go into the ins and outs of any particular arrangement or installation that exists in Northern Ireland, expect to say that nothing will change—nothing will go down, nothing will go up—except on the clear, unequivocal advice and say-so of those who are responsible for advising me on such matters: primarily the Chief Constable, in consultation with the General Officer Commanding.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): Is not the Provisionals' position unchanged in at least two key respects? First, the full implementation of the Belfast agreement has only the potential to remove the causes of the conflict; full implementation itself will not remove those causes. Secondly, the IRA has still not unequivocally and unconditionally committed itself to decommissioning all its weapons.

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Mr. Mandelson: If we trawled over a detailed, word-by-word analysis of all that the IRA has said, we would be here for the rest of the day, but we are not here to do that. These matters are very important, however. We have heard many such statements before. We have to look behind what is meant in addition to what is simply said. I am satisfied, given my examination of these matters, that what has been said has been said sincerely and without cynicism, but it remains to be seen whether what has been said will be borne out by deeds and actions. We should judge the IRA by deeds and actions rather than simply words.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the renewal of the process would not have been possible but for the excellent relationship between the British and Irish Governments and, especially, between our Prime Minister and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern? Will he emphasise in his future deliberations on such matters the continuing importance of the close relationship between the British and Irish Governments, especially on the provision of whatever necessary security, logistical or material support Mr. Ramaphosa and Mr. Ahtisaari will require to do their important work?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes. I have no hesitation in echoing what my hon. Friend says. The relationship is excellent. We would never have got anywhere--we certainly would not have got where we are today--without the relationship between the two Governments, the particularly close relationship between my right hon. Friend and the Taoiseach and the relationship between me and the Irish

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Foreign Affairs Minister. It is a very honest relationship--*[Interruption.]* It is very honest relationship, and no less robust and reliable for that. The Taoiseach and the Foreign Minister have made a tremendous, absolutely first-rate contribution, with their officials, to what has been achieved. Our continuing success certainly depends on that relationship remaining permanent.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): It seems a long time since I first stood at this Bench and talked about disarmament and verification of a process and the need to be reassured that the war is over. We have had numerous euphemisms in the interim, most of which have run into the sand because the nuts and bolts, the practicalities and the technicalities, have not been dealt with effectively. ✕

Now that we are dealing with the real men of violence--the IRA--does the Secretary of State recognise that the Ulster Unionist party still has day-to-day responsibility for reassuring society in Northern Ireland? We do not want the invigilators to work in a detached way: we want contact with them from time to time, especially at the outset, so that they understand what is required from society's point of view.

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I do not know how long we have the two of them in Belfast next Monday, but if it is possible for them to meet the main political representatives during their visit that would be very desirable. Of course the devil is in the detail in all these matters. Whatever other shortcomings and vices I have, not having an eye for detail and not being able to micro-manage things are not among them. ✕ !!

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for the work that they have done and for the welcome statement that has been made today. My right hon. Friend says that he hopes the Assembly will reconvene on 22 May. Does there have to be a vote and debate in the House?

Although there is a statement from the IRA, my right hon. Friend hopes that there will also be one from the loyalist paramilitaries. If it is not forthcoming before 22 May, will he continue with the re-establishment of the Assembly, or will there be a delay because of the loyalist paramilitaries' inability to come up with a statement such as the IRA has made this weekend?

Mr. Mandelson: I hope very much that the loyalist paramilitaries follow up and echo what the Provisional IRA has said. That is terribly important if we are to build confidence right across the community in Northern Ireland. I am not in the business of making conditions about statements or about decommissioning in relation to the devolved institutions.

Mr. Corbyn: Good. I did not want my right hon. Friend to do that.

Mr. Mandelson: I thought for one minute that my hon. Friend was asking me to make that conditional, and to reintroduce a direct relationship between those two things. There will be an order and a debate before 22 May, and I have every expectation that the Executive of the Assembly will be going again on that date if we get the positive response from the parties that we are looking for. ✕

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): Only the IRA knows the size and location of its arms holdings. Therefore,

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decommissioning and the destruction of arms was always going to depend on the calculation of the IRA's interest and its good faith and trust, as the Secretary of State has said. Do not those two things apply equally to the current proposal for decommissioning by way of inspection of these weapons?

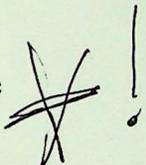
Mr. Mandelson: Yes is the answer to that, but this time we are doing more than merely travelling in hope. What the Provisional IRA has said is so direct and so ~~clear-cut~~ that it would lose a colossal amount if it were to resile in any way from the commitments that it has made. Of course I do not know the size and location of the IRA's weaponry. Although we can deactivate arms, we cannot decommission engineering knowledge and the ability to import or to remake arms should it wish to do so. That is why the motivation and the intention of the Provisional IRA and how that has been stated and described over the weekend is so important. Pursuing political objectives by peaceful means is the top and bottom line of that statement in this situation. That is the big picture, and we should not lose sight of it.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement about the institutions. Is this not the time for all genuinely peace-seeking politicians in Northern Ireland to commit themselves totally to the peace process, and is it not an opportunity for the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble)—for whom I have considerable respect—to make it clear to those around him who oppose the process that he is determined to go down in history as a peacemaker?

Mr. Mandelson: Since becoming Secretary of State, I have long since learned not to give the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) any lectures on how to manage his party. That would be completely beyond me, even if I desired to do it—and sometimes, perhaps, beyond the right hon. Gentleman as well.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman's party will reach the conclusion that we all want and pray for, but it must make that decision in its own way and in its own time. It is a large party, and an intensely democratic party. That is why, for now, I shall leave things in the capable hands of the Ulster Unionist Council.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I give a cautious welcome to what is clearly improving news, but does the Secretary of State accept that there is a significant problem? The arms that the IRA says it will decommission will be, as it were, the institutional arms, which are all in one place. Many weapons will remain at large in the community, and under the control of the IRA. Will the right hon. Gentleman draw to the inspectors' attention the real need to deal with those weapons, as well as the weapons that will appear in the dumps?

Mr. Mandelson: That is not the responsibility of the inspectors, so, with respect, I shall not be drawing it to their attention. 

These arms, right across the community, are not simply in the hands of the IRA; they are in the hands of many people and organisations. That is why, if we are to build

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the decent, democratic civic society that we want to see in Northern Ireland—if we are to succeed in taking the gun out of Irish politics for ever—all those guns and all those people must be addressed, and all those people must be persuaded to deal with the matter. 

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman, but I think that this is something not so much for the inspectors as for General de Chastelain's commission to examine and tackle, and I shall urge it to do so.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Long before the right hon. Gentleman's star span into the political firmament, militant republicanism had shown its murderous capacity for mutation—from official IRA to Provisional IRA, and now from Provisional to Continuity and Real IRA. It will probably continue to mutate long after the right hon. Gentleman has, like some comet, gone into outer darkness. Given that weapons are kept in the barn, under the floorboards and in the house next door—if it is empty—is it not vital that no security arrangements be reduced until such time as, over the years, it has become perfectly plain that weapons are being taken out of society and not just being put on display for the benefit of visiting foreign inspectors?

Mr. Mandelson: I think the hon. Gentleman has introduced a rather cynical—unjustifiably cynical—note. I do not know whether I shall be in outer darkness, or in what part of the firmament I shall be, when we see these organisations, rather than continuing to mutate, fade away and wither on the vine for ever. That is what I want to see—an end to the mutating, and a start to the withering—but it will only happen in the context of politics working and being seen to work. That is why we have set out the proposals that we have set out; that is why we are constructing this backcloth of political change 

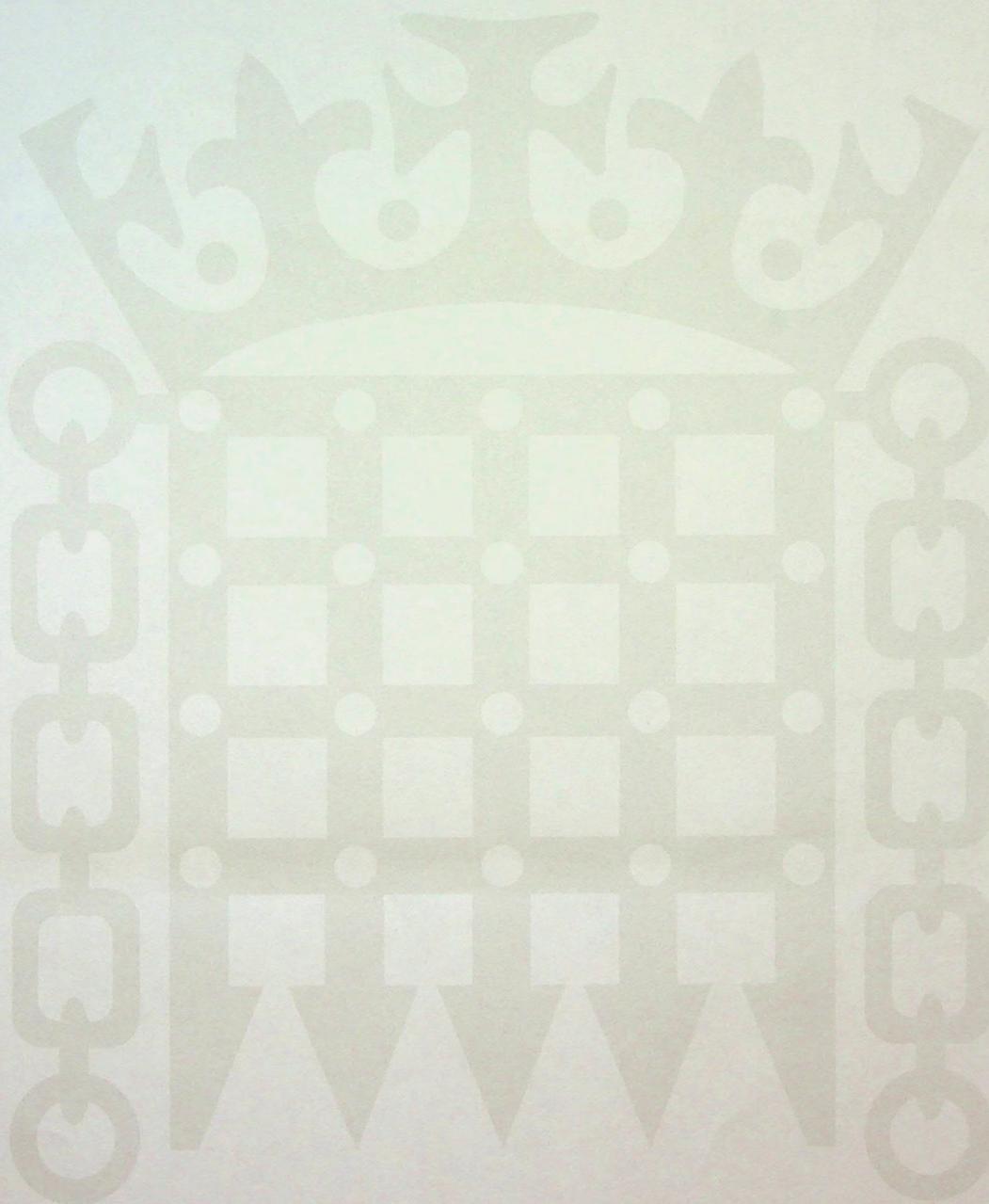
and development in front of which the decommissioning process can get under way—I hope thoroughly, and I hope faithfully.

I hope that we shall be able to come back at some time in the future, and demonstrate that the hon. Gentleman's scepticism was unfounded.

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Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Assembly is to be reinstated this month, but the Secretary of State said, I thought very revealingly, that he did not know whether deactivation would have been completed even by June 2001. Can he therefore give any indication as to when he will judge whether the deactivation process has been a success and, in the light of that, what the status of the Assembly should be? Can he please tell us: will these now increasingly famous dumps be in Northern Ireland, in the Republic or in both? *

Mr. Mandelson: I suspect, in direct answer to the right hon. Gentleman's last question, that the dumps will be in the south, rather than the north, but I cannot say that for sure or exclusively. However, that is what I suspect will be the case.

I am not plucking particular dates or standards, or particular points in time by which I will judge whether the process has been successful or not. It has to be continuous. We have continuously to keep all this under review, continuously to keep the pressure up, continuously to maintain the engagement between the paramilitary *

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organisations and the de Chastelain commission. There is absolutely no point in descending for a day in a month, looking around, asking what is going on and simply walking away and losing sight of what is happening between those times. That is not how I want people to behave. It would not be the best approach to take.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. The House is now ready to take the second statement.

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Sierra Leone

4.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, I shall make a statement on Sierra Leone. I regret that it is one of the gravest statements that I have had to make to the House.

Over the past week, Revolutionary United Front rebels have broken their commitment to the Lome peace agreement and have returned to conflict. They have made a number of attacks on the United Nations forces and on demobilisation camps. At least four Kenyan members of the UN forces have been killed in action. Around 500 United Nations personnel have been detained, including one British UN military observer.

At the weekend, the rebels appeared to be moving on Freetown. The situation in Freetown is tense. I spoke at midday to our high commissioner there, who reported that the police had been successful in arresting a number of rebel bands and had seized arms which they had been about to distribute.