

[Mr. Wilshire]

Because of that assurance, I assume that the Government will now have no objection to writing it into the Bill. New paragraph 25 says exactly what I heard said during the Second Reading debate—that only if a majority of those entitled to vote in Northern Ireland support the outcome of the negotiations in a referendum shall those proposals be put to the United Kingdom Parliament. That is what I believe I heard from the Government and that is what I believe the legislation should say.

I accept that the amendments and the new schedule join together two separate issues: putting the details of the negotiation into the Bill and changing the terms of the Command Paper. It may be that the principle of putting the negotiations in is acceptable and that the details of my changes are not. We will have the Report stage and the consideration before the other place to put the details right, if necessary. It may be that putting the whole of the Command Paper into law will make for rigidity—I can predict some of the things that will be said—and that rigidity is clearly not an ideal way to conduct negotiations.

However, if my chosen way of achieving these things is held to be not the best way, my four concerns that are spelt out in the changes in the new schedule will remain. If the four changes are to be addressed—and there are other ways—I hope that we hear them. We can then decide whether an alternative way of dealing with the four issues can be found over the next two days. If we do not find alternative ways, the next two days could get seriously bogged down because these are fundamental issues and we could face lots more divisions, such as the one that we have just had.

In conclusion, I believe that the best way for harmony to break out in the next two days is for there to be a helpful start. If the Government could agree with these concerns and deal with them in whichever way they feel to be best, I am sure that that will make for shorter speeches, fewer divisions and a more agreeable two days.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Michael Ancram): My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) moved his amendment with characteristic robustness and I listened carefully to what he said. He was right in saying that I might suggest that what he is proposing is somewhat inflexible—indeed, I would go further than that and suggest that there could be serious disadvantages if we were to proceed in the way that he suggests.

I do not recognise in what I see before me in terms of the groundwork paper, the Command Paper, the concessions to Dublin to which he referred. This paper is the judgment of the two Governments as to the basis on which negotiations can be taken forward, but it is important to realise—I shall come back to this point—that the conduct of the negotiations is for those involved in them. I believe that that is an important point, and I am glad to see that the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) appear to agree with that suggestion.

Mr. Trimble: As the Minister says, the paper represents the present judgment of the two Governments. I am sure that he will acknowledge that if and when the process moves forward and comes into the purview of the

parties of Northern Ireland, whatever might have been the judgment of the two Governments up until then will to some extent be replaced by the contribution of the parties from Northern Ireland. As we found in 1992, in many cases the contribution of the Northern Ireland parties will be more positive and a better way of doing things than that prescribed by the two Governments.

Mr. Ancram: I hear what the hon. Member for Upper Bann has to say—indeed, he outlined his views during the Second Reading debate and it was on that basis that I was confident that he, at least, would not wish to see the rules by which negotiations would be conducted written into statute. At the same time, it is right to say that the negotiations are not part of this legislation—I accept that. The legislation is there to provide for entry into the negotiations, but once the negotiations take place they will be for the participants to conduct.

Experience suggests—particularly experience of the 1991-92 talks—that if the negotiations are to serve their purpose, the negotiations that we are setting in train need to be flexible and capable of responding to the wishes of the negotiators. The hon. Member for Upper Bann has said that he has wishes that he wants to make known. In addition, the negotiations should not be confined or constrained by statute.

All participants will want to start the negotiations on the basis of a clear understanding of the way in which they are to be conducted. That is why—after consultation with the political parties—we have published the Command Paper that is our best judgment as to the most suitable and broadly acceptable ground rules. They do not have statutory force because the negotiations, rightly, are not established by statute. I hope that the paper represents a basis on which the parties can agree to participate in the negotiations.

The key message, however—I mentioned this on Second Reading and I repeat it today—is to be found in paragraph 7 of the command paper, which states:

"The conduct of the negotiations will be exclusively a matter for those involved in the negotiations."

I was interested to note that my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne left that passage in the ground rules that he has sought to bring into statute. There is a contradiction in trying to make statutory something which, in its own terms, allows for the conduct to be a matter for those involved in the negotiations.

It is important to understand that we are trying to seek a new consensus on how Northern Ireland is to be governed and how it fits into the other relationships within these islands. We are seeking an agreed outcome to which the parties representing all parts of the community can give their assent and which is then put to the people of Northern Ireland in a referendum for their approval. Consensus and consent are essential if this process is to succeed.

Mr. William Ross: The Minister has used rather peculiar language: he said that Northern Ireland fits into other relationships within these islands. Will he and the Front Bench get it through their heads once and for all that the Unionist parties are interested only in Northern Ireland's place in this kingdom?

Mr. Ancram: One of the relationships that has been referred to at times when we have spoken about these negotiations is the relationship that would exist between