

POSITION OF LOYALIST PARTIES IN TALKS:
STATEMENT TO PLENARY BY MICHAEL ANCRAM, 27 JANUARY

As we made clear in our statement of 21 January, the Government shares the increasing public concern that has arisen as a result of recent car-bomb attacks, the first two of which have been attributed by the Chief Constable to loyalist extremists. We raised those incidents with the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party at meetings on 14 January, and have continued to evaluate the situation.

We have publicly stated that those incidents, and possibly that at Larne on 20 January, inevitably raised questions over the position in the Northern Ireland talks of the two parties associated with the loyalist paramilitaries.

No participant has exercised its entitlement to make a formal representation under rule 29 of the rules of procedure that those parties are no longer entitled to remain in the talks. Nevertheless, the Government has considered the issue carefully.

The question turns on whether the parties have demonstrably dishonoured their commitment to the Mitchell principles. Whether a ceasefire is or is not declared to be still in force, and whether or not it actually is, though they may be relevant, do not directly determine the question.

The Government believe the rules must be observed scrupulously. There must be no double standards. No party should be ejected from the talks unless, as was made clear in earlier rule 29 proceedings, there is 'a clear and unmistakable demonstration that there has been a dishonouring of the principles'. On the other hand, where there is such a demonstration, there is no scope for indulgence: the party concerned cannot be allowed to remain within the talks.

In our consideration, we have taken note of the statements made by the two parties in recent days. We have in particular noted statements such as Mr McMichael's of 14 January, repeated since, that his party remains active in its opposition to violence, and others in a similar sense on behalf of that party and the PUP. We have also taken note of assurances on the part of the two parties that the ceasefire of the Combined Loyalist Military Command remains in force: though, as I have suggested, the fact that a ceasefire had not been declared at an end would not preclude a finding of demonstrable dishonouring.

The Government have considered the position of the parties in the light of these statements, but also in the light of all the information available to us, from whatever source. We believe that the evidence is not such that we can conclude that there has been any demonstrable dishonouring of any of the Mitchell principles by either the Ulster Democratic Party or the Progressive Unionist Party. Accordingly the question of us making a formal representation [under rule 29] does not arise.

We are aware of continuing concern, and will continue to evaluate the position closely.