

Prime Minister's Question Time, Thursday 28 November 1996

Andrew Hunter: Will my Right-Honourable Friend confirm that it is not his policy to barter or bargain for the restoration of an IRA ceasefire which should never have been broken; and that Sinn Fein's self-exclusion from the talks remains absolute unless or until there is an unequivocal reinstatement of the ceasefire and the Provisionals, over a period of time, establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful means?

Prime Minister: Madam Speaker, there's been a great deal of rumour and disinformation on this issue in recent weeks. The government have had a number of exchanges with the Honourable Member for Foyle and others about the possibility of a new IRA ceasefire. We have made it absolutely clear throughout those exchanges that the IRA and Sinn Fein should give up violence once and for all and commit themselves to exclusively peaceful means. We have also made it clear that we cannot and we will not change our policy to bargain for a ceasefire. In order that this should be absolutely clear, we are publishing today a statement of our policy, which we sent to the Honourable Member for Foyle last weekend. A copy is being placed in the Library, together with a short explanatory statement. Madam Speaker, the talks that have been carrying on for some time are likely to break for Christmas soon and to resume later in January. When Sinn Fein could join the talks depends upon their own actions (jeers) Madam Speaker!

Madam Speaker: (angrily) Listen to the answer to the question. These are crucial issues that concern our country! Prime Minister!

Prime Minister: I would say to the Honourable gentleman I think this is a matter of great interest not just to people in Northern Ireland but everywhere. When Sinn Fein could join the talks depends on their own actions. We need to see an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire; we need to be able to make a credible judgement that it's lasting; we need to know they'll sign up to the Mitchell principles. Those matters are in Sinn Fein's hands. We are not seeking delay Madam Speaker. We wish to see inclusive talks involving all parties as soon as possible. But if Sinn Fein continue to exclude themselves, the talks must and they will go on without them.

Ends.