

(Ref:1355/97)

QUESTION NOS: 1 TO 8

DÁIL QUESTIONS addressed to the Taoiseach
by Deputies Bertie Ahern and Mary Harney
for **ORAL ANSWER** on Wednesday, 22nd January, 1997.

QUESTION NO: 1

To ask the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on the prospects for peace and political progress in Northern Ireland in 1997.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 2

To ask the Taoiseach the plans, if any, he has in conjunction with the British Prime Minister to provide a motive force within the talks process to ensure their continuing viability.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 3

To ask the Taoiseach the further support, if any, he will give to the pre-Christmas peace initiative of John Hume.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 4

To ask the Taoiseach the plans, if any, the Government has for changes with regard to maintaining a channel of communication to Sinn Féin.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 5

To ask the Taoiseach if it remains the position that all parties to the Northern talks are required to maintain a strict adherence to the Mitchell Principles.

- Bertie Ahern.

QUESTION NO: 6

To ask the Taoiseach the initiatives, if any, planned by the Government to inject new momentum into the peace process.

- Mary Harney.

QUESTION NO: 7

To ask the Taoiseach the contacts, if any, between officials in his Department and Sinn Féin since Wednesday, 17 December 1996.

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- Mary Harney.

QUESTION NO: 8

To ask the Taoiseach the discussions, if any, he has had with the British Prime Minister since Wednesday, 17 December 1996.

- Mary Harney.

REPLY.

I propose to take Questions 1 to 8 together.

The responsibility for political progress rests in the first instance with the two Governments. We have exercised this responsibility through putting in place agreed procedures and mechanisms for the fair conduct of multi-party talks and the commencement of these talks on 10 June last year. In addition, we have made constant and unremitting efforts over the past seven months to move these talks into substantive negotiations in the three strands. The talks represent the best, and probably the only, way of achieving agreement among the parties.

The prospects for peace in Northern Ireland depend on all sides exercising their responsibilities. Of course, everybody does not have the same responsibility.

People who kill, or encourage others to kill, bear a greater burden of responsibility for the lack of peace in Northern Ireland than those who passively support violence. Equally, those who passively support the politics of violence have a much higher responsibility for the lack of peace, than those who support parties which reject

violence. There is an onus on all democrats to speak and act against violence and sectarianism in all their manifestations. Violence and sectarianism continue because, regrettably, a minority continue to give them active or passive support.

The Government are convinced that, provided the will is there on all sides, and provided all are prepared to act responsibly, 1997 can be a year both of peace and of political progress. For our part, we will continue to do everything in our power, as we have done in the past, to secure these objectives. We will work in close co-operation with all who share, and who are committed to, exclusively peaceful and democratic means. In particular, we will do everything we can to optimise the prospects for substantive progress in the multi-party talks, including, if possible, in advance of the forthcoming General Election in the United Kingdom. We continue to work in close contact with Mr. John Hume, with whom I recently had an extensive private meeting. We support his continuing efforts to obtain an IRA ceasefire.

On the question of contacts with Sinn Féin, the Government made clear, in response to a request for a meeting from the Sinn Féin leader, immediately after the IRA had resumed its campaign by the bombing of Canary Wharf:

1. that we wanted the IRA ceasefire to be restored immediately;

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2. that the basis for the previous Government meetings with Sinn Féin had been that a total cessation of IRA violence was already in place;
3. that further Ministerial meetings with Sinn Féin must be consistent with this long-standing policy;
4. and that, notwithstanding the resumed IRA campaign, a meeting at official level could take place on the basis that Sinn Féin would bring forward their ideas at that meeting on how the ceasefire could be restored.

That meeting took place and since then, there were a number of official-level meetings within that channel of communication.

During the eleven month period in which these meetings were taking place, the Irish Government secured

1. a fixed date for the opening of all party talks;
2. eminent and independent Chairmanship of the Talks;
3. agreed Rules of Procedure to protect the position of minority parties within

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the talks;

4. Irish Government involvement in face to face discussions in the talks with parties, some of whom had never previously had any contact with the Irish Government;
5. the effective removal of the Washington Three precondition, as well as a clear commitment in statements from both Governments, that Sinn Féin will be admitted to the talks once they comply with the terms set out publicly.

Despite all these advances, which were designed, *inter alia*, to secure an IRA ceasefire, and the meetings which were held at official level with Sinn Féin, we have seen in the interim - not an IRA ceasefire - but more and more IRA violence which has intensified to the point that at least nine IRA attack attempts, of a major kind, took place in the past three weeks.

IRA violence, more than anything else, has isolated the nationalist community in the North from all those who wish to help them to achieve parity of esteem. IRA violence is partitionist. IRA violence has provided a pretext and a context for sectarianism. IRA violence is an invasion of human rights which, in some nationalist areas, has substituted arbitrary and unaccountable penalisation by a secret

organisation, for accountable justice through an open courts system.

It has to be said that the intensified activity on the part of the IRA, over Christmas and so far this year, makes it difficult to believe that the Republican movement is not now deliberately attempting to pursue a parallel ballot-box and armalite strategy, *sometimes* which is unacceptable to democrats and which accordingly, should not be assisted politically or otherwise by a democratically constituted Government. The official channel of communication, to which I referred, can be used whenever the Government receive reliable assurances that an IRA ceasefire is attainable in a genuinely short term horizon, and that previously identified and realistically attainable things need to be discussed at the meeting, and done, that will achieve that end. If such assurances are received, meetings can be arranged at very short notice. The sole purpose of any such meeting would be to end IRA violence, once and for all, and quickly. *such an agreement could be imposed, rather than freely negotiated.*

In response to Question 5 from Deputy Ahern, I can confirm that all parties to the multi-party talks are indeed required to maintain a strict adherence to the Mitchell Principles. This is made clear beyond doubt in the 28 February 1996 Communiqué, the Ground Rules paper, and the agreed Rules of Procedure for the talks.

I have already reported to the House on my meeting with Prime Minister Major on 9

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December last. I do not believe that it is always appropriate or useful to report on every contact with the Prime Minister. I can however assure the House that this year, as during last year, intensive contact will be maintained at both political and official level with Downing Street wherever desirable or necessary. This is of course additional to contacts already under way with the British authorities, including intensive contacts on a daily basis in the context of the multi-party talks.

The multi-party talks process, as any political realist could have seen from the beginning, is an inherently difficult one. It was set up to achieve agreement on profoundly divisive questions affecting allegiance, between a diverse range of parties, some of whom previously had little or no dialogue with one another. But we need to remind ourselves that the underlying assumption of the peace process has always been, from the outset, that such an agreement, although difficult, is possible. The concept that such an agreement could be imposed, rather than freely negotiated, is contrary to the basis on which the all-party talks were sought and agreed to. The Governments do, of course, have a responsibility to give pro-active leadership in the talks at appropriate junctures.

The slow pace of the talks is, naturally, a matter of regret. To those in the majority community who may be reluctant to move from traditional positions, I would point out that the outcome of the talks has to be approved by the people by means of

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referendum. To the minority community, I would point out that the involvement and endorsement of the Irish Government is contingent on the achievement of an agreement, within the three strands, which is fair and just to nationalist aspirations. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, so all parties have a specifically designed structure, within which they can make contingent concessions to one another's positions, in the interests of ultimate overall agreement. I would urge all parties to do so, so that there can be forward movement, and Northern Ireland can enjoy a stable and universally accepted political structure, which is the precondition for all durable economic and social development.

ENDS

(22/01/97 12:57:31)

An Ceann Comhairle: Messages have been received from Seanad Éireann stating that it has accepted the Appropriation Bill, 1996, without amendment, and passed the Oireachtas (Miscellaneous Provisions) and Ministerial and Parliamentary Offices (Amendment) Bill, 1996, without amendment.

CEISTEANNA - QUESTIONS.

1. Mr. B. Ahern asked the Taoiseach if he will make a statement on the prospects for peace and political progress in Northern Ireland in 1997. (1365/97)

2. Mr. B. Ahern asked the Taoiseach the plans, if any, he has in consultation with the British Prime Minister to provide a motive force within the talks process.