

## Door to peace still open

JOHN MAJOR'S statement yesterday of Britain's present position on the North should not cause an upsurge in pessimism.

There is very little in the statement that we did not already know. There are no new conditions laid down for Sinn Fein's entry into talks. In fact there is quite a lot of plain commonsense in what the British Prime Minister had to say, and quite a lot our Government would agree with.

When the IRA broke the ceasefire it scuppered Sinn Fein's chances of getting to talks immediately. The return to violence also meant that no British government could ever again do business with Sinn Fein until it was satisfied that an IRA ceasefire would remain in place. Yesterday's statement merely reiterated the position of a government which was fooled once but does not intend to be fooled again.

"We need to see an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire", the British Prime Minister said "and to make a credible judgment that it is lasting. We need to know that Sinn Fein will sign up to the Mitchell principles". Unless the majority in the Republic are adopting an utterly simplistic attitude to the North these conditions seem perfectly reasonable. Why they cannot be implemented right away to allow Sinn Fein to get to talks and have an influence on their outcome continues to be a source of confusion.

It has to be taken as a measure of some comfort that Sinn Fein's immediate reaction to Mr Major's statement was not totally negative, that John Hume (despite his regret that correspondence was published) could say that there were "constructive" elements in the statement and that our own Government, through Mr Spring, could say that "there are some positive indications in that statement". Mr Trimble, though for different reasons, also came out positively. Mr Paisley did not.

Political realism may also be informing the attitudes of everyone on the nationalist side. Even if Mr Major were prepared to take a chance on a ceasefire which came without some guarantees (and obviously he is not) he has to deal not only with the unionists in the House of Commons but with those Tory backbenchers who these days are always on the point of rebellion. There is a limit to his freedom of action.

At the end of the day the ball remains, as ever, in the IRA court. Its refusal to declare the kind of ceasefire which would allow Sinn Fein to the conference table is holding up history. What it is being asked to do is not unreasonable — end violence and start talking.

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## TIME FOR COMMON SENSE

The ball, to paraphrase the Government last night, is now at the feet of the republican movement. What matters most is that talks should start and prevarication, by all sides, should cease. The republicans must take aboard the fact that as far as the unionists are concerned, the game of peace or war is one that two can play. If the current state of quasi-ceasefire with occasional acts of savagery turns into a resumed full-scale onslaught, it will merely confirm, for unionists, the intransigence of their opponents. It will not shift them out of their bunkers.

There is nothing to be gained in this direction for those whom Sinn Féin and the IRA purport to represent. On the other hand, a ceasefire, and participation in talks, offers a viable way forward. That is, or should be, one of the implications of Mr Mitchel McLaughlin's statement last night, after Mr Major's session in the House of Commons, that "Sinn Féin will not walk away from this project" (the effort to secure peace). But the language is equivocal because Mr McLaughlin was accusing Mr Major of failing to focus on the things that are important to Sinn Féin.

It is up to Mr McLaughlin and the people he speaks for, to tell the public in this island and in both the main communities, why a renewed ceasefire should not have credible guarantees, and why ancillary activities by the IRA, like punishment beatings and surveillance of possible targets, should not end. He deludes himself if he imagines that these are issues that matter only to unionists. In practical terms, the refusal to comply has alienated many people who support some elements of the republican agenda.

In the Government's statement, there was impatience with the present impasse, solidarity with London on the paramount necessity to establish peace in order to enable the parties to negotiate on democratic terms, and a commitment not to permit "any exclusion of Sinn Féin once these conditions are fulfilled". Behind the careful words of Mr Bruton and Mr Hume last night, there was deep uncertainty about the wisdom of the British statement, centring on how to determine the genuineness of Sinn Féin's commitment — an issue that was bid up by the IRA, in British eyes, by the Manchester and Thiepval Barracks bombs. Mr Major, without specifying a time-limit, outlined steps after a ceasefire, including exploratory contacts and a joint meeting with the Irish and British governments to secure Sinn Féin's "early, total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles".

Is the whole edifice to fall apart on acceptance of these proposals, which must be a minimum for the other political parties involved in the process? Sinn Féin is on shaky ground if it insists that it is being asked to accept "the British government's terms", because, before and after the IRA ceasefire was ended, the ground rules were changed at Sinn Féin's specific demand. The process it appears to require is as unrealistic and meaningless as one hand clapping.

The unionists, in the meantime, have been playing out their own internecine quarrel over whether the loyalist paramilitaries should disarm before the two loyalist parties enter negotiations. Does anyone want peace, or is the common objective a good moral position in the post-peace situation to whose inevitability everyone seems determined to contribute? There is much to be done in the Christmas break. In that month there is time for common sense to break through. At least, last night, no doors banged.