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From: Hayes/Nolan

STATEMENT ON THE TALKS  
11 November 1992

The following are the main points which arose in this afternoon's debate on Mayhew's statement. Both Mayhew's and McNamara's speeches have been faxed to you.

In summary, throughout the debate Mayhew sought to convey an upbeat and positive assessment, resisting Unionist efforts to draw him into recriminations and finger-pointing. The DUP were predictably negative but on the OUP side, apart from Molyneaux's low-key statement, all the other interventions from that quarter, in varying degrees, blamed Dublin and the SDLP. Maginnis led the attack followed by Taylor, Trimble and Beggs. Kilfedder limited his intervention to asking whether future discussions could be widened to take account of all the parties.

Due to a hiatus in the programme of business, the debate went on a good deal longer than the 30-40 minutes originally anticipated. The result was that all those wishing to speak were called, including several who normally would not have had the opportunity to speak. This facilitated the numerous interventions on the Unionist side.

In reply to McNamara, Mayhew confirmed that the British Government stood by the assertion of November 1990 that they had no selfish, economic or strategic interest in the current constitutional position of NI. He said there was no question of an imposed solution, that a settlement could only be arrived at by agreement with all those concerned and that there would be no alteration in the status quo while dialogue continued.

Andrew Hunter, Chairman of the Tory Backbench Committee on NI, was the first speaker from the floor. He poked up on Alderdice's statement and asked if the chances of progress would have been greater if the SDLP and the Irish Government had show more flexibility. Mayhew's response was to declare his unwillingness to be drawn into discussions of individual positions and to warn against recriminations - a line which he continued to take throughout the debate.

Molyneaux was then called. In a low-key and non-recriminatory intervention, he identified Strand One as being the "most vital" where there had been a considerable degree of progress. He asked Mayhew to facilitate this degree of progress in the informal consultations. He attacked McNamara's defence of the AI Agreement - a point echoed by almost all the other Unionist speakers. In his reply, Mayhew made the point that he was anxious to do anything to facilitate agreement among the parties in NI but that he did not wish to lose sight of the objective of making progress towards a new beginning in the totality of relationships.

As expected, Paisley attacked Articles 2 and 3 and also focused on the meeting of the IGC. Mayhew replied: "it was perfectly true that the Irish Government had asked for a meeting and were perfectly entitled to

do so under the terms of the AI Agreement". There had only been four meetings this year whereas there had normally been eight and he would make no complaint about the holding of the next meeting. He also welcomed the fact that the Irish Government have made clear their willingness to put 2 and 3 on the table along with other matters. He repeated his unwillingness to comment on specific aspects of the process which he hoped would "recommence very soon".

Hume led the SDLP response. He believed the discussions had had very many areas of constructive dialogue and agreement as well as disagreement and that represented progress in terms of the depth of divisions which existed. He added that dialogue was the only road to the future and looked forward to working with the other NI parties in the informal discussions to follow. He said the SDLP's approach to the talks had been to face the task of accommodating two sets of legitimate rights - the right of both unionists and nationalists to the expression of their own identity. In order for this to be translated into institutional expression, the Unionists accepted that this transcended the confines of NI and to this end they look to London. However, they did not seem to accept the equal right of the nationalists to look to Dublin for expression of their identity.

Mallon reminded the House that all the parties knew when they responded to the invitation from the two Governments to take part in the talks, that there were going to be difficult questions including the fact that unionists would not become nationalists overnight and vice versa. He hoped the opportunity would be taken during the informal discussions to face those problems which could not be wished, ignored or talked away and which must be faced. Mayhew agreed that the enormous deep-rooted problems were not solvable overnight but that there was plenty of time and no lack of determination.

McGrady completed the SDLP's interventions. He maintained that the existence and workings of the Agreement had been the conduit which brought the parties together, adding that the talks could have continued if certain parties hadn't felt it necessary to withdraw. He hoped the recess would be short and that the mechanisms would be facilitated to return to the three inter-twined Strands. Mayhew replied that he was very anxious to get things going and moving in the right direction.

David Alton (Lib Dem) wondered if Mayhew would consider the publication of a Green Paper which would lead to a series of propositions which could then be decided by a referendum. Mayhew dismissed this idea.

Maginnis asked if the Secretary of State would agree that there was one party at the table who had gone beyond the normal courtesies, had been lacking in goodwill, flexibility and common-sense and had made not a single solitary compromise in the whole process. Insofar as this party was joined with HMG in the AI Agreement - did this not show the folly of conferring on a Government which lacks responsibility the right to interfere in the affairs of NI? Joining in earlier criticism of McNamara, he asked the Secretary of State to give consultation with the NI members precedence over the Irish Republic which had proved so reluctant to enter into the spirit which everyone else had tried to inject into the talks. Mayhew replied that the elected NI MPs always had precedence in that they could see him at any time and that if any party lacked flexibility and movement, they would have all the more scope in further consultation.

Robinson asked Mayhew to consider the basic structure of the talks process which had caused its failure. He had concluded that certain parties were so content with the status quo i.e. the AI Agreement that they were not encouraged to move from it. He asked Mayhew to construct a level playing-field and end the marginalisation of the unionist community caused by the AI Agreement. Mayhew said he understood his position but that the Agreement was in force and the Government would be loyal to it. He referred to the statement of 26 March 1991 and to the objective of finding a new Agreement "to supplement or replace the AI Agreement"

Barry Porter, in an appeal for plain speaking, said the talks had clearly failed and there was nothing wrong in admitting that. He didn't believe in political alchemy or squaring the circle. There was nothing new in the idea of informal discussions among the NI parties since these were going on anyway. He was the first of a group - which included Jim Couchman (Cons), Stuart Bell (Lab), and David Winnick (Lab) - to raise the example of the British Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body as an appropriate forum for dialogue and to call on the Unionists to take up their seats (an appeal which drew vigorous head-shaking from the OUP benches). Mayhew agreed that it was an extremely valuable body whose reports he valued very much and expressed his wish that the Unionists would take their seats.

Taylor criticised the Dublin Government saying that failure of the talks was inevitable due to their refusal to move on Articles 2 and 3 and to the clear rejection by the SDLP of devolution. He asked that Mayhew consider the integrationist alternative.

Trimble continued the OUP attack, saying that since Strands Two and Three were deadlocked, the parties should go back to Strand One. Mayhew replied that there had also been progress in Strand Two on North/South institutions which were a matter primarily for those going to work there - the NI parties and the Irish Government. He did not agree that there was no merit in the Agreement. He believed a recognition had grown from it that Dublin has a legitimate interest in some of the affairs of NI.

Beggs asked Mayhew to tell the House exactly what progress had been made and attacked the intransigence of the Dublin Government and the AI Agreement. This was the first occasion on which Mayhew slapped down the OUP attack telling Beggs that the parties ought to be getting on with dialogue and not pointing the finger.

To the embarrassment of the Labour front bench, Kate Hoey called for the establishment of a NI Select Committee since, she said, it was obvious that NI would remain part of the UK for the foreseeable future. In his reply, Mayhew referred her to the Government response to the report of the Select Committee on Procedure which, he said, stated that the Government had no objection provided the proposal met with the approval of the House and would have the support of the broad community in NI.

Other speakers included Harry Barnes, Norman Godman, Jim Marshall and Dennis Skinner who, in a call for troops-out, launched a personal attack on Mayhew.