

6 July 2010 : Westminster Hall

## Terrorism (Northern Ireland) extract of reply to debate

...The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Hugo Swire): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr McCrea) on securing this debate. No one can have failed to be moved by what he said. I acknowledge the loss that he has suffered with the murder of members of his family, and the horrible scenes to which he has borne witness. My sympathy and, I am sure, the sympathy of the whole House, is with him.

In the time left to me, I will try to answer all the questions that right hon. and hon. Members have asked me. I recognise and empathise with the suffering of all victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland. The list of innocent victims read out was a salutary reminder of the horrors and injustices of the past. What struck me more than almost anything else is how many of them were young and were cut off before they reached adulthood.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in his statement to the House on 15 June, we should never forget that the overwhelming majority of those who lost their lives in Northern Ireland—some estimate nearly 90%—were killed by terrorists. The brutal terrorist campaigns waged by republican and loyalist paramilitaries caused enormous suffering, whose lasting impact I do not forget, but I remain firmly of the view that there was and is no justification for politically motivated violence. I want to make it clear that the Government absolutely condemn the terrorist crimes that have been committed.

The hon. Member for South Antrim raised a number of important points about Government policy in relation to victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland. He is right to emphasise the importance of addressing victims' continuing needs. As a UK Minister, I am mindful of the need to recognise that a number of important powers relating to victims' issues have been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Our considered response to the Bloody Sunday inquiry report demonstrates that, for our part, the Government take seriously our responsibilities on the past, but I am firmly of the view that dealing with the past cannot be a matter for the UK Government alone. As the victims commissioners said, an effective approach to the past will be based on political and civic consensus.

To answer the question asked by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Paul Goggins), about the Government's approach to future inquiries, I can only concur with Justice Minister David Ford, who said: "We cannot have a Saville-type inquiry for all the tragedies of the past, but the fundamental matter of dealing with the past is something which has to be dealt with collectively by the Executive."

The shadow Minister also compared the Bloody Sunday inquiry to cases involving other victims. To respond to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson), the Prime Minister made it clear in his speech at La Mon House during the general election campaign, and again in his statement on Saville, that no Government he leads will ever put those who uphold democracy and the rule of law on an equivalent footing with those who have sought to destroy it. **We will also not be party to a rewrite of history that seeks to give a spurious legitimacy to terrorist campaigns on all sides.** I am clear that the state must be determined to judge itself against the highest standards. In relation to the Bloody Sunday inquiry report, the Prime Minister demonstrated how that had to be true and how the state's standards had to be higher than those elsewhere. It is important that the Government continue to emphasise the crucial distinction between the state's response to wrongdoing, and the actions and responses of terrorists.

The hon. Member for South Antrim is, of course, right to note that the public inquiries that are under way have proved very costly. **The Government are clear that there will be no more open-ended and costly inquiries. However, our views on the process followed for such inquiries should not detract from the need to consider the substance of their reports when they are published.**

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) raised the work of the Historical Enquiries Team. The Government have been strongly supportive of HET, which is investigating 3,261 deaths

in the period 1968 to 1998, including deaths from all sides of the community. I understand that HET has completed 782 reviews relating to cases involving 1,007 victims.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley and the shadow Minister raised the issue of funding for HET. They will know that responsibility for directly funding HET now lies with the devolved Administration. However, the Government have made a substantial financial package available to the Northern Ireland Executive to deal with these issues. Despite the pressure on finances, we have honoured the commitments we gave in opposition on the matter. The Government have not directly specified nor should they that the Executive should make funds available to HET or, indeed, to the police ombudsman. That is properly a matter for the Justice Minister and the Executive to decide on. However, the financial package that the Government have provided enables the Justice Minister and the Executive, despite the huge pressure on the public finances, to continue to ensure that such important work has the funding it requires.

On addressing the needs of victims more generally, I welcome the work being done by the First and Deputy First Ministers, the victims' commissioners and the victims' forum. Some positive steps in the right direction include the strategy for victims and survivors published last November, the comprehensive needs assessment being undertaken by the victims' commission, and the plan to introduce a new victims and survivors service next year. I am very much aware of the role played by voluntary and community groups on the ground in Northern Ireland. As I am sure we would all agree, their work in supporting victims and promoting reconciliation is crucial. I agree with the victims' commissioner's view that we must build "from the ground up" when considering how best to deal with the past in Northern Ireland.

A number of issues raised by the hon. Member for South Antrim relate to the broader question of how best to deal with the past in Northern Ireland. I reiterate my view that there is no question of the Government imposing solutions on Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I intend to listen to the views of people from across the community on dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. That listening process will be important in helping to determine the role that the UK Government can play.

I also want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State and I intend to meet victims and groups from both sides of the community to listen to their views. He has specifically raised a number of cases involving murders committed by republican terrorists. I fully recognise that the memories of those atrocities remain raw for many people in his community. I reassure him that I agree with the point made by the victims' commissioners that the past cannot be dealt with in a way that holds only the state accountable. The commissioners have identified a number of cases that they note retain iconic significance for the Unionist community. I recognise that that is an important point, and I stress to the hon. Gentleman that the Government will approach the legacy of the past in a measured and impartial manner. It is important that any approach to the past does not seek to favour, or is not perceived as favouring, any particular section of the community.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann raised a **specific question about the past role of the Irish Government**. It is of course for the Irish Government to respond directly to specific allegations relating to their past role. However, I recognise the importance of involving the Irish Government in discussions on how best to deal with the legacy of the past. The hon. Gentleman will want to know that the Secretary of State has already had a series of meetings with the Irish Government, and that I will be travelling there shortly. In the Taoiseach's statement to the Dail last week, he noted that the Irish Government would continue to work with the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive on contributing to the healing process in Northern Ireland. I welcome that commitment.

Before I conclude, I shall address some of the points raised during the debate. The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, asked for an update on progress with the Wright, Nelson and Hamill inquiries. We expect all those inquiries to publish their findings by the end of this year, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will today lay a written statement on the pre-publication process for the Billy Wright inquiry report. Other inquiries will follow a similar process, with a written ministerial statement.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked **whether the Attorney-General had reopened any inquests and what their costs will be**. He will understand that in Northern Ireland, the new Attorney-General has exercised his powers in that regard. With devolution of justice powers, issues such as the cost of specific inquests should now be addressed to the Justice Minister, David Ford. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about the Finucane inquiry,

and I can tell him that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has written to the family and offered to meet them. I know he is very keen for that meeting to take place as soon as is practicable. On Ballymurphy, again, the Secretary of State has met the Ballymurphy families and intends to do so again in the very near future.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann raised the issue of the security file and Gerry Adams. Regarding the publication of any security information held by the Government, he will know that it has been the long-standing policy of successive Governments never to comment on security matters. The hon. Gentleman asked me to meet the victims, and I would of course be happy to meet him and any of the victims he mentioned in his speech. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already met many victims' groups and will continue to do so.

Today's debate has been on the Government's policy on the victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland, and in the time available to me I have tried to show that we do not believe that it is just for the UK Government to impose such a policy on the people of Northern Ireland. If it is to succeed, it must be done in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive and, at times, the Irish Government. However, crucially, such a policy can provide some of the answers to the questions we have discussed this morning only if it is done by the people of Northern Ireland—the people who have suffered in the ways we have heard about this morning. I was particularly struck by what the hon. Member for Upper Bann said about wanting our children to have a better future than their parents did. I can think of no better way to end the debate than with a note of cautious optimism. With devolution now working in Northern Ireland, we can all—those of us who have responsibility—work together to make Northern Ireland a better place in the future.