

Mr. Trimble nor his Sinn Fein counterpart Gerry Adams seems willing to give way first.

The most likely formula revolves around the status of ministers.

It has been suggested that the appointment of ministers with shadow powers would be a clear signal to republicans of unionist bona fides. This in turn would give republicans space for the beginning of actual decommissioning.

There may be an element of wishful thinking here. But it is difficult to see any other solution which would give both sides the space they need.

Mr. Trimble would be able to tell his electorate that republicans would not bet a hand on the reins of power without movement on weapons. Mr. Adams would be able to say that Sinn Fein ministers had been appointed without decommissioning being given in return.

Both men should take encouragement from the real desire for movement within the community they serve.

That was well articulated yesterday by the G7 group which represents business and the trades unions.

Their interests are at one with the interests of the entire community. They know all too well that political stability will bring enormous economic rewards.

Sir George Quigley put the issue succinctly when he said: "For everybody to wait for somebody else to move before moving themselves is a sure recipe for permanent immobility.

"Northern Ireland has no future of any quality except as a stable, inclusive, fair, prosperous and outward-looking society."

That fact has not been lost on the prime minister. Yesterday Downing Street let it be known that Tony Blair intended to become "much more fully engaged" in the coming weeks.

Mr. Blair has played a crucial role in moving the process forward. He has done so because he has earned the respect of both traditions.

He should know that the vast majority of people on this island, as well as within Northern Ireland, will support efforts to find a way around this problem which recognizes the concerns of both sides and strives for an accommodation.

Mr. WALSH. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman. As always, I am inspired by the thoughts and words of my colleagues. Certainly nothing stirs the blood of an American more than the issues of war and peace and freedom and liberty versus subjugation of philosophy or religion or free speech.

My colleagues who have spoken tonight not only have given their thoughts and words to this, but their time. Many, many of them have traveled back and forth over the Atlantic to lend whatever assistance we can to this very critical process at a very critical time. I am inspired by their actions, and I am comforted by their actions, and I am comforted by the leadership that both parties have provided, that our president has provided. Progress would not have been made without that effort.

I would also like to thank our dedicated staffs who have put so much time, of their time and energy into this, providing us with a the background, making the phone calls, staying on top of the issue. It is not just out of the fear that they will not have their job, they are doing it because

they believe in it. Their effort is appreciated.

I would also again like to thank my colleagues. There were many who had planned to attend this evening's special order, but with the change in schedule they headed home, people like the gentlemen from New York, Mr. PETER KING, Mr. VITO FOSSELLA, and Mr. JACK QUINN.

For the good of the order, I would like to make my colleagues aware, and the gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. NEAL) knows that, that the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. HASTERT), the new Speaker of the House, accompanied President Clinton on his first visit to Ireland back in 1995 at the historic beginning of the American role in this peace process under President Clinton's leadership.

This is a critical time. As has been mentioned, there are several critical dates coming up. We will be watching. The price of failure is great. The judgment of history if we fail will be cruel and harsh.

With the receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, Mr. Trimble, along with Mr. Hume, was recognized. Their efforts were recognized, but the stakes were raised. Surely with the receipt of this prize comes a tremendous responsibility to fulfill the obligation of truly creating peace.

If Mr. Trimble is to be a leader of all of the people of the north of Ireland, certainly he must address the hopes of the vast majority of those people who voted for the agreement, not his interpretation of the agreement.

We have worked together well, Republicans and Democrats, House and Senate, President and Congress. We cannot stop now, we are so close to the end. I am reminded, after we had spent a good 5 or 6 days in Northern Ireland this summer with Speaker Gingrich, full of hope, we returned to the United States, only to be advised on landing that a bomb had exploded in Omagh, killing little kids and pregnant women and old folks and people with hope and promise and belief that peace is at hand.

Let us not let those lives go for naught. Let us continue this effort. Let us close the deal. Let us bring peace and justice to all of Northern Ireland.

Mr. COYNE. Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening to urge the participants in the Northern Ireland peace process to continue carrying out the agreement that was reached and ratified last year. I also want to thank my esteemed colleague and good friend, RICHARD NEAL, for organizing this evening's special order.

Mr. Speaker, many of the Members of Congress who, like myself, have been actively involved in Irish affairs were greatly pleased when negotiations last year were successful in producing the Good Friday agreement on the future of Northern Ireland, and when the people of Ireland subsequently voted to approve the agreement. This was a major step in resolving this unfortunate, bloody stalemate. I was honored to have been asked to be part of the official U.S. delegation visit to Ireland and Northern Ireland last September.

No one anticipated that there would not be further setbacks and obstacles to peace as the process agreed to last year was implemented. The Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland, the conflicts during last summer's "marching season," and the debate over the scheduled release of IRA prisoners, all threatened last year to derail the peace process that was set in place by the Good Friday peace pact. Now, the peace process has become stalled over disagreement over Sinn Féin's participation in the new executive assembly.

I want to urge the signatories to the Belfast Agreement to abide by the clear terms of the agreement they signed. All of the signatories agreed that the terms that they agreed to were fair to all involved. Moreover, the voters overwhelmingly approved this process. Now is not the time for anyone to back out of their commitments or to renegotiate the parts they don't like. No, Mr. Speaker, the peace process has been clearly laid out and agreed to. The alternative is more violence and terror and stalemate. The people of Northern Ireland deserve peace. Enough blood has been shed. I urge the parties to the Belfast Agreement to carry out their obligations under that document and take the brave steps necessary to achieve a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

A RESPONSE TO LETTERS FROM CONSTITUENTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the Chair recognizes the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. SHIMKUS) for 60 minutes.

Mr. SHIMKUS. Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to respond to letters that were sent to me by many of my constituents. I would also like to thank each of these individuals for notifying me of their concerns. I want to encourage more of my constituents to become proactive in issues that are important to them. Writing letters, sending E-mails, and even picking up the phone and calling my office is a great start.

The first letter that I will read addresses the topic of abortion, and although I have received over 200 letters this year on this topic, I unfortunately only have enough time to read one. The letter that I have chosen to read was written by Tasha Barker, a 17-year-old high school student from Vandalia. This is her letter.

Tasha wrote, "Dear Congressman Shimkus, I am writing you this letter to express my feelings about abortion. I feel that abortion is a horrible thing, and that killing an innocent life is awful. When it comes to making decisions or taking stands about abortion, please remain pro-life. It would be greatly appreciated by many people. Thank you for taking the time to read these letters, Sincerely, Tasha Barker."

Good letter, Tasha. I also received letters from Charles Hake of Nashville, Robert Smith of Quincy, and Mary Black of Springfield, to which I would also like to extend my responses.

Plus I would like to thank the group of young people from Vandalia whose

names are Becky Bowerly, Lorin Keck, Marlis and Bob Hayner, Joe Sebright, Kathleen Gale, Amanda Beth Bowerly and Lauren Roberts, who sent letters to me on this issue.

I, too, am very concerned with the lack of regard for human life. Abortion is a sad commentary on our society and a procedure which, once again, should be outlawed. Already since the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision, more than 38 million unborn children have been killed in the womb. Thomas Jefferson said it best: "The protection of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government."

To fulfill my role as a pro-life leader in Congress, I supported three separate bills in the 105th Congress that were designed to prevent the destruction of human life. The first bill was H.R. 929, the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1997, which would amend the Federal criminal code to prohibit performing a partial birth abortion in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce unless it is necessary to save the life of the mother and no other medical procedure would suffice.

□ 1800

This bill passed the House by a veto-proof majority in this body.

The second bill was H.R. 3682, Child Custody Protection Act, which would amend the Federal criminal code to prohibit and set penalties for transporting an individual under the age of 18 across a State line to obtain an abortion and thereby abridging the right of a parent under a law of the State where the individual resides requiring parental involvement in a minor's abortion decision.

However, the bill makes an exception if the abortion was necessary to save the life of the minor.

The third and final bill was H.R. 641, Right to Life Act of 1997, which states that the Congress declares that the right to life guaranteed by the Constitution is vested in each human being at fertilization.

I want you to be assured that I will always vote to protect human life and the rights of the unborn. I plan on co-sponsoring the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act again in this Congress and have recently added my name as a co-sponsor to the Right to Life Act of 1999.

For my next letter, I would now like to address an issue that has been brought to my attention by 102 constituents in the form of postcards.

The issue of concern is private contracting for health care. The postcard reads, "Dear Representative John Shimkus: The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 contains a provision (Section 4507) which prevents seniors from privately contracting for certain healthcare services with the doctor of their choice. This new law gives the bureaucracy even more control over seniors' healthcare and prevents them from getting all the care they need or want.

I urge you to cosponsor and work for passage of legislation which will repeal this unfair and dangerous law."

I would like to say that I am fully supportive of this position. In fact, I have already cosponsored legislation, H.R. 2497, the Medicare Beneficiary Freedom to Contract Act, in the 105th Congress, that would address your concerns. Unfortunately, H.R. 2497 was not brought up for a vote in the 105th Congress. However, I look forward to supporting this type of legislation once it is introduced in the 106th Congress.

The provision (Section 4507) which prevents seniors from private contracting was added to the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 under pressure from the administration. The President threatened to veto the entire budget agreement if we did not give in to the administration's demands. For example, if a healthcare provider such as a doctor chooses to privately contract with one patient, they could not accept Medicare assignment for any patient. Additionally, the provider must refrain from accepting any other Medicare patients, and submitting bills to Medicare on their behalf for a period of 2 years.

This provision is detrimental not only to providers but to those who want to contribute their own money to receive the services of their personal choice. This is a prime example of the Washington knows best mentality, the kind of thought which I have real problems with. Consumers, not bureaucrats, know best.

H.R. 2497 would have returned the right to individuals to be treated by a physician of their choice outside of Medicare when they are paying for that service entirely out of their own money.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me regarding this very important issue.

The issue of my third and final letter is taxation of the Internet. I have received over 900 letters, or shall I say e-mails, on this issue, and here is an example of one that was printed out for this period of time. Therefore, I have chosen a letter that I would answer the general premise of each letter.

Debbie Brown-Thompson of Edwardsville, wrote: As a taxpayer in your district, I would like to urge you to vote against paying Internet charges to the phone company in order to use the Internet. It is my understanding that the Internet was designed to make communicating with the rest of the world much easier. If we are forced to pay long distance charges for these local calls, the Internet will no longer be easier than other forms of communication.

There are also many children who use the Internet for school projects, and this may end the educational benefits of using the Internet for them as well. Please vote no on any Internet tax.

Not only would I like to address my response to Debbie, but I would also

like to include Gene Ralston of Rushville, Charles Byars of Texico and Kim Lohman of Hillsboro, all of whom wrote similar letters addressing the Internet tax.

I share your concern that the growth and usage of the Internet may be stifled by costly charges, and I will fight any effort which attempts to do so.

Neither I, nor the Republican Congress, have any intention of increasing charges or taxes on the Internet. I serve on the Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Trade, and Consumer Protection which hears about all the exciting new things that are occurring in the technological field, and the thing that we will be fighting very fervently about is to make sure that this great new form of communication commerce will not be obstructed by taxation.

I have heard that news outlets have erroneously reported that Congress was considering charging long distance fees for going on-line.

In fact, the 105th Congress enacted a bill which I cosponsored called the Internet Tax Freedom Act, which established a moratorium on Internet taxation. The Internet Tax Freedom Act will protect against taxes on Internet access, prevent discriminatory taxation of electronic commerce and protect traditional commerce against the imposition of new tax liability if it merely happens to be facilitated over the Internet.

Mr. Speaker, the Federal Communications Commission has created a fact sheet to answer Members' questions regarding this issue. I recommend that they visit their web site at: www.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Common_Carrier/Factsheets/nominate.html.

As a former teacher, I remember my lesson plans on how to contact Members of Congress, and in that lesson plan we talked about contacting them through the use of letters, and letters are a very great form. Letters can now be used on the Internet, as e-mail, and the thing that makes letters so important and that most members want to see are letters that are personal, are letters that have heart and meaning, soul searching, but also short and sweet and to the point.

So I want to thank my constituents who have been very helpful in making me understand the concerns of the 20th district, and I look forward to sharing their questions and my responses to them at another time throughout this year.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. SHIMKUS. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the special order of the gentleman from New York (Mr. WALSH).

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. GARY MILLER of California). Is there