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MPs who will not take the oath

You report (13 May 1997) the Speaker's ruling that the two Sinn Fein MPs who decline to take the oath of allegiance, and so cannot assume their seats, must not after all use the facilities of the House of Commons. This does not wholly resolve the problem posed by MPs like Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams who, in the Speaker's words, choose not to take up their responsibility as Members.

Such MPs deprive even those constituents who did not vote for them of effective parliamentary representation. It is nauseating for Mr Adams to say, as you report: 'I have a duty, as has Martin McGuinness, to represent my constituency'. It seems necessary to state the obvious and point out that the sole purpose of a parliamentary election is to procure the election of representatives who will 'take up their responsibility as Members'.

I suggest that what is needed is an amendment to the duties of returning officers as laid down by the Representation of the People Acts. If a returning officer learns that a candidate has indicated that if elected he intends not to take the oath of allegiance the officer should have to require him to sign a statutory declaration of intention to take the oath if elected. Refusal to sign would disqualify the candidate from standing in the election. The voters who nominated him could then choose another candidate who better understood the nature of what he was about.¹

¹ *The Times*, 16 May 1997.