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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 February 2012

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Resignation of Margaret Ritchie

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I advise the House that I have received a letter from Ms Margaret Ritchie giving me notice that she intends to resign as a Member of the Assembly with effect from 31 March 2012. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Matter of the Day

Oscars: 'The Shore'

Mr Speaker: Mr Robin Swann has sought leave to make a statement on the Oscar success of the film 'The Shore', which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Mr Swann to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call Members from the other parties as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak. As Members will know by now, there will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until this item of business has been dealt with. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Swann: I am delighted to bring this matter of the day to the House on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. 'The Shore' is a film directed by Belfast man Terry George and filmed near the director's family home in Coney Island. It stars major Northern Ireland actors such as Ciarán Hinds, Maggie Cronin and Conleth Hill and depicts Northern Ireland in a hugely positive light. Therefore, it is without doubt a Northern Ireland film in every sense.

Last night, 'The Shore' was awarded an Oscar in the short film live action category. That is a fantastic achievement, given the prominence of an Oscar as the highest accolade possible in the film industry. Although we have had a number of Oscar nominees from Northern Ireland in the past, including Liam Neeson, Kenneth Branagh and Seamus McGarvey, to win in that category this year is outstanding.

However, what did this Assembly do to make the best of that success? What plans did the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure put in place to mark such a significant occasion

as the winning of this award? Where was Invest NI, for example?

The same could be said for Rory McIlroy, who performed so well last night and finished runner-up in the WGC Match Play in Arizona. We must capitalise on successes of that nature. However, it seems that we are missing opportunities. The creative industries, in particular, must be adequately supported, given that this is the largest of a number of successes in the area and follows on from the hugely popular 'Games of Thrones'.

In conclusion, I pass on my congratulations to the director, Terry George, and to all the cast and crew of 'The Shore' on their magnificent achievement.

Miss M McIlveen: I echo the positive sentiments of the Member who spoke previously. Over recent years, the film-making industry in Northern Ireland has grown dramatically, and that has been helped in no small part not only by the funding given to Northern Ireland Screen but by the ability of Northern Ireland to attract film-makers to our shores through the work of the Northern Ireland Executive. With major television shows such as 'Games of Thrones' and movies such as 'Your Highness' and 'Killing Bono', we are developing the technical skills to go with the artistic talent of directors such as Terry George.

Terry George is already a well-known and respected screenwriter and director. He has previously been nominated for two Oscars, so it really was third time lucky in this case. No doubt many in the Chamber took the opportunity last night to watch 'The Shore' on BBC Television ahead of its Oscar triumph. The film centres on characters played by the immensely talented Ciarán Hinds and Conleth Hill. 'The Shore' was funded by Northern Ireland Screen and was filmed entirely on location in Northern Ireland. As Sammy Wilson would say, it was "Made in Ulster". This is a proud day for all of us in Northern Ireland, and I hope that, with the continued support of the Assembly through funding for film-making here and the positive promotion of Northern Ireland throughout the world, we will have many more days like this.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I add my congratulations to those of the Members who spoke previously, and I thank Mr Swann for raising this matter. This is very much a historic occasion in that it is third

time lucky for Mr George. I also congratulate his daughter, who was instrumental in this as well.

My memories of Conleth Hill go back a long time. In fact, I remember him playing in St Canice Hall some 30-odd years ago. Until this morning, I thought that St Canice Hall in Dungiven was the last independent cinema in the North, but I hear that there is one in Comber as well. I worked in that cinema, so I have a great grá for the motion picture industry.

Some years ago, I was also fortunate enough to be one of the first trainees with the Irish Language Broadcast Fund. From that fund, we have developed quite a number of new companies that are producing films and television programmes. When there is an achievement of world standing, we really should shout about it. It is a great celebration of Killough in County Down and, of course, Coney Island, which was made so famous previously by Van Morrison. I extend my heartfelt congratulations to Mr George, his daughter, the cast and actors, and all those who made the film very successful.

On Thursday, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure held a workshop, and a number of the main film and television producers were among those who attended. I know that the industry is one that can go from strength to strength in this part of the world, because we have the product, the people and the scenery.

Mrs McKeivitt: On behalf of the SDLP, I congratulate Terry George, one of my constituents from South Down, and the whole cast of 'The Shore' for winning the Oscar for the best live action short film at the eighty-fourth annual Academy Awards. Their success highlights the massive potential we have in Northern Ireland for cinema and television production. Terry George dedicated his success to the people of Northern Ireland during his Oscar acceptance speech, but it is we who have to thank him today for his continuing work and support for Irish cinema.

As was highlighted, the cast were from right across Ireland, from Belfast to Ballycastle and from Tipperary to Clare. Those actors represent us on a global scale, and they have participated in some of the biggest cinema and television successes of the past year. Ciarán Hinds, for example, starred in 'Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy' and Conleth Hill stars in the highly successful and — I am proud to say — Belfast-based HBO series 'Game of Thrones'.

Danny Moore, a former chief operating officer of Lough Shore Investments, said that the main reason it invested in 'The Shore' was the impact it could have on the branding of Northern Ireland, as it enters a new era, to the world.

In his speech, Terry George said that we negotiated a peace and proved to the world that the Irish are great talkers. The film is about someone who fled to America because of the Troubles. God, what a difference peaceful times have had on our shores when people, particularly our youth, are leaving for totally different reasons.

It is only fitting that we will be discussing the centenaries of historic events later today in the Assembly. The film shows that, even though we may have come through difficult times, our lives can be improved by understanding and respect for each other's beliefs and history.

In closing, I again congratulate Terry and his team for their success, and I urge the Minister to continue to ensure that her Department works to highlight the potential that Northern Ireland has for cinema and television production. I look forward to more great films, not least the one to be filmed in Downpatrick, which will star Brendan Fraser.

Mr Lunn: I add the Alliance Party's congratulations to the comments already made about the film, which I was lucky enough to see last night. It is a lovely piece of work. It is very atmospheric, and it is amazing what can be packed into a relatively short period: it lasts about 25 minutes. It is not overloaded with dialogue either; a lot of it is visual and atmospheric. I thought that it was a terrific piece of work. As others have said, it shows once again what the film industry can do here. Obviously, we have the facilities, the actors and actresses and people like Terry George to write it for us. I did not know until yesterday that he wrote the screenplay for 'In the Name of the Father', which was nominated all those years ago. Goodness knows how on earth he did not win for that as well.

I heard this morning that the film is being made for download, rather than for cinema viewing, but that is the way nowadays. People will see it on their computer screens and tablets, but it is a pity that it could not be seen on the full screen because it would look really well. The scenery around Coney Island, Killough and the Mourne was stunning. It is a marvellous piece of work. Congratulations to Mr George and all of his crew.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your indulgence and before I go into the body of the statement, I put on record our thanks and appreciation to Mr George, his family and all those involved in 'The Shore'. A small investment from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has gone a long way to brand our industry here.

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting, which was held in Enniskillen on 14 February 2012.

The NI Executive were represented by myself as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht Affairs. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a progress report from Mr John Martin, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, including the following significant achievements: the provision of 862 metres of additional moorings in 2011, including 84 metres at Castle Hume, County Fermanagh, 525 metres at Killaloe, County Clare, 62 metres at Aghalane, County Fermanagh and 191 metres at Terryglass, County Tipperary; the completion of the 2011 sponsorship programme, with over 63 events being sponsored across all navigations; the provision of three new publications to promote and support the use of the waterways; ongoing maintenance of the waterways with 99.98% of waterways remaining open during the boating season; the completion of a revised marketing strategy; and the provision of an agreement that enables Waterways Ireland to act as an agent for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to make prosecutions under article 53 of the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and by-law 19 of the Lough Erne by-laws.

12.15 pm

The Council noted progress on the development of Waterways Ireland's 2012 business plan and budget and it received a progress report on restoration work for the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal. Ministers noted that a formal planning application was submitted to the relevant authorities in both jurisdictions in October 2011 and that planning permission had been received from Cavan County Council. Monaghan County Council and Clones Town Council have sought further information from Waterways Ireland on the planning application. Waterways Ireland will present to the next NSMC inland waterways meeting a discussion paper setting out the options for advancing the Ulster canal project.

The Council considered four specific recommendations concerning Waterways Ireland. It agreed to refer the following recommendations for endorsement to the June 2012 NSMC plenary meeting: sponsor Departments to consider options for the setting up of a board that comprises fewer than 12 members and to present proposals for consideration at a future NSMC inland waterways meeting; sponsor Departments to implement as appropriate, through changes to legislation or other administrative means, a de minimis provision for dealing with Waterways Ireland's disposal of a waterway or part of a waterway; sponsor Departments to review current provisions for Waterways Ireland's commercial activities to ensure that they are adequate and to report to a future NSMC inland waterways meeting; and, taking account of current economic and fiscal circumstances, no further action to be taken at this time to extend Waterways Ireland's remit.

The Council consented to a number of property disposals. It agreed to hold its next meeting on inland waterways in summer 2012. Go raibh maith agat.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

The Minister will be aware that the Committee received a delegation on the Newry to Portadown canal with regard to the canal's inclusion under Waterways Ireland's remit. Was that issue raised at the NSMC? If so, what was the outcome? How can the Minister's Department assist associations that restore sections of canals that fall outside Waterways Ireland's remit, given

the potential economic and social benefits to communities in those areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Committee Chairperson for her question. The Newry canal and others that are not within Waterways Ireland's remit are not normally discussed during those meetings. I am not in a position to answer specific questions on that canal. However, I will provide a full answer to the Member. My understanding is that the inclusion of any canals or waterways that are not the responsibility of Waterways Ireland may potentially require legislation. I am happy to write to the Member on the issue that she has raised.

Mr Ó hOisín: Will the Minister give an assurance that the environmental and heritage aspects of our waterways can be safeguarded?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can absolutely assure the Member that the environmental and heritage aspects of waterways will be safeguarded. The Member will be aware that it is important to try to reach a balance between preserving canals' heritage features and providing opportunities for tourism, particularly with regard to boating and cruising. The requirement for a formal environmental impact assessment on any works should prevail. We need to look at waterways and such sites as living assets. To that end, we are really keen to make sure that the environment is protected and a balance is sought between that and tourism.

Mr Swann: Can the Minister provide clarification on the option to set up a board that comprises fewer than 12 members to present proposals for consideration at a future NSMC meeting on inland waterways? Would that not be the establishment of a further North/South quango to advise the North/South Ministerial Council? If that board is established, what would it discuss, who would decide its remit, and who would be on it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. In my statement, I said that proposals are being brought forward on the board. Waterways Ireland is the largest of the North/South bodies, yet it does not have a board. Bringing forward proposals for a board does not suggest that there are any issues. However, for the largest body not to have a board is not in keeping with good practice in governance. To that end, it will have a board. Proposals for it will be brought forward at the next NSMC meeting. I am happy to share the outcome of that meeting with Mr

Swann, other members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and, indeed, other Members.

Mrs McKeivitt: One of the four specific recommendations considered at the meeting was a change to the legislation for the disposal of a waterway or part of a waterway by Waterways Ireland. Why does Waterways Ireland need that power? Does it have any plans to make such disposals?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We want to give Waterways Ireland the authority to dispose of small areas of land without needing approval from both Departments. That provision will be de minimis and will cover the disposal of land that is worth less than £25,000. It will also allow for good practice and good governance, and will ensure that there is a clear understanding of what Waterways Ireland can and cannot do. The creation of such a provision has been raised before and we said that we would bring it forward. Therefore, this is progress and, through it, we are providing clarity.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister said that the next NSMC waterways meeting will set out:

“options for advancing the Ulster Canal project.”

Is there any hint that that project may be curtailed or that less will be done than was formerly envisaged?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Some time ago, the Irish Government made a statement that their budget for developing some of the capital works that they had committed to was under threat. The Ulster canal was mentioned in that statement.

At previous NSMC waterways meetings, we agreed to progress that project as much as possible. One of the first stages of the programme of work was to seek leave for planning permission, and that has happened. The project will be kept under constant review at each stage, and the Ulster canal project is firmly at the top of the agenda of NSMC waterways meetings and other meetings that I have with Minister Deenihan. Any progress on that project will be reported at the next NSMC waterways meeting in June.

Mr Irwin: Can the Minister give us any more detail on the Council consenting to “a number of property disposals”?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Council approved the disposal of four properties that required NSMC approval, all of which are in the South of Ireland. None of the disposals was deemed to be contentious or financially significant. I will try to find out where those properties are and write to the Member.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed statement. Will the Minister tell us what progress has been made on the Clones to upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As I said to Kieran McCarthy, planning applications have been submitted in both jurisdictions to progress the work on that part of the Ulster canal. In the previous statement that I gave to the House on a NSMC waterways meeting, I indicated that planning permission would be sought, and that has now happened. As I said to Kieran McCarthy, I will meet Minister Deenihan before the next waterways meeting to find out what other progress has been made. That programme of work is on schedule.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the Ulster canal and, in particular, the Clones to upper Lough Erne portion of that canal. Will she give us details of the costings of the entire Ulster canal project and, in particular, the Clones to upper Lough Erne portion, for which planning permission has now been sought? Have those costings been reviewed recently?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has asked several questions about the upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal, as he does anyway.

The 2006 business case indicated a capital cost of £171.5 million for the restoration of the entire canal. That included site navigation, an environmental impact assessment and project management and construction costs. The estimated costs to restore the Clones to upper Lough Erne section is currently €45 million. The construction costs for that section will be entirely funded by the Irish Government, and, when it is built, my Department will contribute ongoing operational costs that are estimated at £37,000 per annum.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers so far. Will she outline how Waterways Ireland intends to raise the profile of our inland waters as a vital tourist product?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Waterways Ireland's marketing and promotion strategy was launched away back in 2004 and revised in 2011. The 2011-16 marketing and promotion strategy was drafted in consultation with all key stakeholders of the market advisory group, which includes organisations such as Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The revised strategy is currently being implemented and will build on the success of the previous strategy. I agree with the Member's sentiments; it is vital that we use our inland rivers and waterways to promote tourism, particularly in those towns and villages that rely practically solely on the tourism product.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sí dúinn ar maidin. Ba mhaith liom an méid seo leanas a fhiafraí di. I thank the Minister for her statement. Is she, in principle, in favour of extending Waterways Ireland's remit, given improved fiscal and economic conditions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am, in principle, trying to look for opportunities to extend the canals and waterways. That was not raised at the NSMC meeting, nor was it included in my statement. I can say that I am, in principle, in favour of extending it. Does that mean to say that it will happen if the budget is there? Absolutely not, but I will look at the potential for that. In our towns and villages, as I said to Raymond McCartney, our canals and rivers have a major role to play in key tourism opportunities. As an Executive, we need to exploit that as best we can.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for her statement. Reference has already been made to the tourism potential of inland waterways, and I note that the Minister has said that there is an ongoing review. Considering the importance of waterways to tourism development, particularly in the north-eastern part of this island, will she outline what further support is required, if any, from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Fáilte Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland and the equivalent Department in the South to pump-prime tourism in order to increase revenue potential and the well-being of the people?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. As she knows more than most in the Chamber, given the fact that those details were not in the statement, she is asking almost theoretical questions that were not covered at

the NSMC meeting. I am happy to write to the Member with a list of the questions that she has raised today, and I thank her for raising them.

Mr Allister: I note that, this morning, the Minister was able to tell us that the statement was made under "the Northern Ireland Act", which was progress from her usual shorthand of "the NI Act".

I want to ask her about that part of her statement that relates to the St Andrews Agreement review proposition of a board for Waterways Ireland. Is that for an advisory board or a management board? Given that Waterways Ireland has been running for many years without a board, why is it now thought necessary, or is it just jobs for the boys that will add to the expense of Waterways Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure that the Member heard the answer that I gave to Robin Swann about setting up a board. One of the recommendations of the St Andrews review report was that a 12-person executive management board be appointed to direct Waterways Ireland's affairs. Waterways Ireland is the biggest of the North/South bodies with no board; therefore, it is in keeping with good policy, practice and governance that options and proposals to establish a board will be brought to the next NSMC meeting.

12.30 pm

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

Ms Ní Chuilín (Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the fourteenth North/South Language Body meeting, the tenth since the restoration of the NI Executive and Assembly, and the first held in 2012. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, who was the accompanying Minister. I attended the meeting, held in Enniskillen on 14 February 2012, representing the NI Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) junior Minister Jonathan Bell MLA. The Irish Government were represented by Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht Affairs. Minister of State McGinley chaired the meeting.

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulstèr Scotch — the Ulster-Scots Agency — and Foras na Gaeilge — the Irish Language Agency. I will now present a summary of the issues discussed by the Council on 14 February 2012.

The Council received progress reports from Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on collaborative work and other activities of the two agencies, including training and induction for new board members and plans for language body board meetings; the development of an agenda for cultural showcases for 2012, including participation in the Olympic torch relay; sharing expertise and resources on a range of corporate and HR issues; the revision of the equality scheme for the language body; and agreed contracts of employment. Foras na Gaeilge's examination system for Irish language editors was established, and accreditation certificates were presented to the first cohort of eight editors in November 2011. Foras na Gaeilge was awarded a three-year contract to provide specialist Irish language courses to the public sector for the 2011-14 period. In excess of 8,000 participants received music and dance tuition during 2011 from peripatetic tutors funded under a scheme provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency, and reviews of the Ulster-Scots

Agency's financial assistance and community workers' schemes were completed in 2011.

The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) approved the North/South Language Body corporate plan for 2011-13 and the business plan and budget for 2011, and noted progress on the development of the 2012 business plan and budget. The Council noted that the consolidated language body 2008 annual report and draft accounts are being compiled for submission to the Comptrollers and Auditors General and the NSMC with a view to laying them before the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly in spring 2012. Ministers also noted that a revised process to simplify and speed up the consolidation of accounts has been introduced and that work is in hand with a view to laying the accounts for 2009 and 2010 during 2012.

The Council noted progress made by the Ulster-Scots Agency in developing and introducing quality indicators for its tuition programme. The agency has adopted the quality indicators across a number of work programmes, which demonstrate high-value outcomes and increased value for money. Ministers also noted how quality indicators are supporting the accreditation for schools initiative.

Ministers noted the progress that has been made to date by Foras na Gaeilge with regard to the ongoing consultation. The Council agreed that in the context of continuing to achieve satisfactory progress, interim funding may continue to be provided by Foras na Gaeilge to the existing core funded bodies until 30 June 2013. A further progress report will be presented at the next NSMC language body meeting. The Council noted progress to date in regard to the recommendations of the review of Áis, the book distribution service of Foras na Gaeilge, and the agreement of a detailed implementation plan with the sponsor Departments.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair)

Ministers noted the announcement by the Irish Government, in their public service reform plan published on 17 November 2011, of the cancellation, in light of the current difficult economic situation, of the decentralisation programme, with some projects being cancelled, others being left in situ and others being reviewed. The Council tasked officials of the sponsor Departments with considering, in consultation with Foras na Gaeilge, the possible implications

arising and to report back to a future NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

The Council considered a number of recommendations specific to the language body and agreed to forward the following recommendations for consideration to the June 2012 NSMC plenary meeting. First, no further action is required concerning engagement between the language body agencies, sharing of services between the agencies and consolidation of accounts since work is already under way to address each of those issues. Secondly, no further action is required concerning the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency to take forward work associated with the promotion of the Ulster-Scots language and culture outside the island of Ireland. Legal advice has indicated that the existing legislation presents no difficulty with that. Thirdly, the sponsor Departments will continue to assist the Ulster-Scots Agency to achieve value for money within existing budgetary constraints. Fourthly, no action is required at present concerning an increase in the board membership of the Ulster-Scots Agency. That issue will be kept under review, subject to consideration of the legislative and financial implications.

The Council agreed to hold its next language body meeting in summer 2012.

Miss M McIlveen: I welcome the fact that there is no difficulty with the Ulster-Scots Agency broadening its work outside Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Will the Minister actively help it to promote that work?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will actively help the Ulster-Scots Agency to promote that work. In fact, I think that it would acknowledge the work that I have done to date to get it this far and, indeed, the work of the Finance Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel. I am particularly keen to talk to other Executive colleagues about how we get the agency's work advanced and even mainstreamed through, for example, facilitating meetings with Ministers. A meeting with the Department of Education will take place fairly soon to look at the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency in promoting cultural heritage and awareness in schools. It is a very good project that is still in development, but it is moving on with consent, support and approval. I thank the Member for her question, and I will keep her updated on progress.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an dara ráiteas a rinne sí inniu. I thank the Minister for her second statement today. Was the Minister given prior notice of the Irish Government's announcement to cancel their decentralisation programme? What are the implications for Foras na Gaeilge?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In short, I was not given prior notice by the Irish Government regarding their decentralisation programme, particularly in Gaoth Dobhair. I am on record, during the meeting on Valentine's Day in Enniskillen, as expressing my disappointment at the decision to cancel the decentralisation programme and at not having been given notice of it. I understand that the decision to decentralise parts of Foras na Gaeilge to Gaoth Dobhair was originally taken as far back as 2003, but, as I said, the decision was taken unilaterally by the Irish Government, and no consultation was held with me. Failing to implement a programme may impact adversely on the development of the language, particularly in rural areas, and it may create significant difficulties for Foras na Gaeilge and people who are awaiting those services in that area.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Council received a review of the Ulster-Scots Agency's financial assistance and community workers scheme, which completed in 2011. What is the Minister's assessment of that scheme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: My assessment is that the scheme and the proposals to extend beyond North/South to east-west are very ambitious. They are also in keeping with the work of the British-Irish Council on east-west dimensions. We were responsible for looking at Slí Cholmille, the scheme itself and other aspects of the scheme, such as the community work and summer schools. It was introduced in 1999 and received significant programme support in 2006 to increase the number of schools and applications that will be continued. The scheme has completed. Community workers are involved, and there is additional support. The Ulster-Scots Agency has rolled out the scheme and got other people in the community interested, and I am sure that the Member will share my view that this is an opportunity for people to get on board, create an awareness of what happens and see how it can be further developed throughout the Ulster-Scots community in the future.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí den Aire: an bhfuil sí sásta go bhfuil Foras na Gaeilge ag dul i gcomhairle leis na heagraíochtaí croí-mhaoinithe le teacht ar chomh-réiteach ar mhúnlú na samhla nua maoinithe agus go bhfuil níos mó i gceist leis an síniú ar an chomhairliúchán ná tuilleadh den mhéid a bhí againn cheana féin.

I thank the Minister for her statement. Is she satisfied that Foras na Gaeilge is engaging meaningfully with the core-funded Irish language organisations in order to shape the new funding model in such a way that those organisations are not threatened by it? Is she happy that the extension to the consultation is useful and is not just more of the same?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As the Member is aware, the consultation is ongoing and will not finish until 2 April this year. We received a progress report from Foras na Gaeilge on the ways in which the consultation is progressing, and I am satisfied with what I have heard. I appeal to the Member and other Members who were working closely with the Irish language community well before most that if they have any other suggestions about how Foras na Gaeilge could enrich and enhance the consultation process, I would be happy to forward those on, because I believe that there should be an opportunity for as many people as possible, beyond the 19 funded groups, to have a say on it.

The proposed extension to June 2013 is fair, given that the consultation is fairly significant. People who are doing good work need to have the security of an additional extension. It would be inappropriate for me to make any other comment, at this stage, about what that may look like or what should or should not happen, particularly as the consultation is ongoing. I am happy with the Member's continued interest and look forward to hearing from him, or anybody else, about additional opportunities that Foras na Gaeilge could use to help people to feed into the consultation.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat to the Minister. In her statement, the Minister mentioned that Foras na Gaeilge was awarded a three-year contract to provide specialist Irish language courses to the public. Does Tha Boord o Ulstèr-Scotch not have a similar contract to provide

specialist Ulster-Scots language courses? Is that not a case of the Ulster-Scots language and Ulster-Scots Agency falling further behind?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To take his last point first: no, it is not a case of the Ulster-Scots Agency falling behind. It is a case of trying to meet the demand. The Ulster-Scots Agency did not bring forward proposals at this stage, but that is not to say that it will not in the future. I appreciate the Member's interest in this, and I appreciate him using his cúpla focal, as he has done persistently. I thank him for his interest. I will share any further details on how the scheme will be rolled out by Foras na Gaeilge for public sector workers with the Committee in the first instance, and I will write to the Member.

Mr Irwin: I note that progress has been made in relation to accounts. I note that accounts for 2009-2010 are expected this year, in 2012. When does the Minister expect to have the accounts for 2011?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister — sorry, William; not yet. The Member will be aware that there was a fairly substantial backlog across all the accounts and plans, but that is now getting cleared up. It took a bit longer to have the 2011 business plans and the 2011-13 corporate plans improved because, as I mentioned earlier, the work that Minister Wilson and I were involved in around the Ulster-Scots Agency corporate plan and business plan regarding east-west links took some time. We had to check to make sure that we had the legal authority and that we did not require additional legal permission to do so. That was done. We did that in a diligent way. As the Member will be aware through his position as Deputy Chair of the Committee, the accounts need to be cleared in order. All that can be done is done. Each time we make a statement regarding the accounts and the business and corporate plans, it is actually progress. I thank the Member for his ongoing interest.

12.45 pm

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she give examples of successful projects being undertaken by Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work is ongoing on HR and a range of corporate issues. Indeed, one of the best examples of the two agencies working together in recent times has been the revision

of equality schemes. The agencies are also helping each other with and are involved in the proposed route of the Olympic torch, as well as in accreditation schemes for schools. Both agencies have been responsible for not only attending each other's events but promoting them. In many respects, both agencies have led by example.

Examples of such work have been given, including Foras na Gaeilge's English/Irish dictionary and the Ulster-Scots Agency's increased number of community development officers. Both agencies have learned a lot from each other and are continuing to work together closely. We can look forward to more joined-up work and to additional programmes coming from shared experience and shared expertise.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement. Like my colleague Miss McIlveen, I, too, welcome the freedom that the agency will be given to work across the North Channel between Ulster and Scotland. I think that that is long overdue.

Given the St Andrews review, why is there no progress on the expansion of the Ulster-Scots Agency board, given that six of the counties of Ulster are in Northern Ireland and that 75% of the budget for the Ulster-Scots Agency comes from the Northern Ireland exchequer? Having served on the agency board, I know that, at times, it is unable to form subcommittees and is sometimes inquorate. So, in my view, expanding the board to bring in more members from Northern Ireland would be common sense and practical.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It may be. The Member has additional experience that others may share, but reviews and considerations of the governance arrangements have given no indication that an increased board membership is needed at this stage. It has nothing to do with finance; it is just that the reports that I have received from Mr Ian Crozier on the progress of the Ulster-Scots Agency, or even from Tom Scott, who is the chair of the board, have given no indication of that need. If those concerns are raised with me, I will be happy to look at them and respond accordingly. However, I am glad to say that although that may have been the Member's experience in the past, it is not the current experience.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement.

Does the Minister think that it is appropriate for the CEO of Foras na Gaeilge to make public comments when the consultation process into future funding arrangements is ongoing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not surprised that this point has been raised. In fact, I was waiting for Dominic to raise it. As I said, the comments, which were recorded at the meeting, were inappropriate. It is inappropriate for anybody to comment on or to respond to remarks about any of the core-funded groups at this stage, given that the consultation is ongoing. I voiced my disappointment of same.

I repeat the call that this consultation process happened because people in the two Departments — Ministers and officials — listened to what the core-funded groups had to say. Another consultation, which ends on 2 April, was produced as a response. It is really important that people do not provide any impediments or excuses that would allow others to feel that they did not have a full, open and transparent opportunity to feed in to that consultation. I repeat that it is inappropriate for anybody to go beyond what I just said.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht na bhfreagraí a thug sí go nuige. Maidir leis an chuid dá ráiteas a bhain leis an chonradh de thréimhse trí bliana faoi choinne sainchúrsa Gaeilge a chur ar fáil sa réimse poiblí, an féidir leis an Aire a insint dúinn an bhfuil sé ar fáil don stát seirbhís ó Thuaidh agus, go háirithe, cén chuid den réimse poiblí a bhfuil sé ar fáil dó?

I thank the Minister for her previous answer, particularly her response about Foras na Gaeilge's being awarded the three-year contract to provide specialist Irish language courses to the public sector. Can the Minister provide us with some detail as to what aspects of the public sector the programme is available to in the North and to the take-up of same? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is always a pleasure listening to Patsy speaking as Gaeilge. The detail of what the programme entails will be brought forward. I am sure that the Member will agree that it is a welcome advancement, particularly in relation to the publication that the then Minister O'Keefe brought forward in relation to Foclóir, which is an Irish dictionary of parliamentary usage. However, what that means and who can avail themselves of it is under review. It is important that people

have the information so that they can get involved in the process, but I will bring the progress on that to DCAL, in the first instance, and then I will be happy to write to the Member with further details.

Mrs McKeivitt: Is the three-year contract that was issued for specialist Irish language training available to the public sector in the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It will be. In answer to Mr McGlone's colleague's question, the Member is on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I will bring the details of how people can avail themselves of it at the next earliest opportunity to the Committee. As I said, I will also write to her colleague with those details.

Mr Allister: I want to ask the Minister about the vexed issue of the 2008 accounts. When she last reported on a North/South meeting in respect of the language body following the October get-together, she told us:

"the 2008 annual report and draft accounts have been submitted to the comptroller and auditor general (C&AG) in each jurisdiction". — [Official Report, Vol 68, No 2, p67, col 1].

Today, speaking of the same accounts, she told us that the report and accounts:

"are being compiled for submission to the Comptrollers and Auditors General".

Which is it? Why are we regressing? How can she tell us in October that they have been submitted, and in February, tell us that they are being compiled for submission? Is the House not due some consistency and transparency on the issue? Just tell us: have they been submitted or are they being prepared for submission? If they are only being prepared, why were we told otherwise in October?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. The North/South language body's 2007 annual report and accounts were laid in June 2011, and my Department is responsible for the delay in having them published. Foras Na Gaeilge is responsible for producing the consolidated reports and accounts for the North/South Language Body. A revised process to simplify and speed up the consolidation of accounts has been agreed by the Comptrollers and Auditors General and Finance Departments, North and South.

Foras Na Gaeilge has temporarily contracted an employee to clear the backlog. Following

certification and consolidation, the accounts will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas in spring of this year. At the 14 February meeting, I emphasised that I expect a much quicker turnaround of the annual report and accounts. That aspect of the work must be given priority.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I asked a question about the 2008 report. Why did I get an answer relating to the 2007 report and no explanation as to why, last time, we were told that the 2008 reports had been submitted, yet, today, we have been told that they are being prepared for submission?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member has made his point. It is up to the Minister to come back to clarify whatever confusion may have arisen with Mr Allister.

Assembly Business

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: As with other similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Paul Givan replace Mr Robin Newton as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. — [Mr Weir.]

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Final Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Final Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 4/11-15] be agreed.

Today's Final Stage of the Budget Bill brings to a close the legislative process for this financial year. The House has debated the Budget Bill and Supply resolutions over the past few weeks. I am sure that Members will be very pleased to hear that I do not intend to repeat everything that has been said. I suspect that some Members might repeat what they said previously, but I am not going to indulge in the same tactics.

I have been encouraged, at times, by the nature of the debate, with some Members showing a detailed understanding of the Bill and the rationale for the legislation that is in its Final Stage. The Budget Bill covers the 2011-12 financial year and provides legal authority to spend in the first few months of 2012-13.

Looking at the management of public expenditure in 2011-12, we can see that we began the year with an overcommitment, which we sought to manage through the in-year monitoring process. Throughout the three monitoring rounds, we were able to remove the overcommitment as well as reallocate surplus funding to key areas such as employment, health, education and social concerns. However, we are not finished in 2011-12; we still have a lot to do in the remaining weeks. Ministers must make every effort to ensure that departmental budgets are adhered to, thereby ensuring that we minimise underspend and the risk of having to return unspent funding to the Treasury. That would be a difficult circumstance to explain to citizens, especially at a time when we are saying that we are working our way through one of the tightest Budgets that we have had for some time.

Not only have we still got a lot to do in 2011-12, but the Executive have a responsibility to carry that momentum into the next financial year, the first few months of which are covered in the Budget Bill. We must seek to ensure that public expenditure is fully utilised so that we can give the guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland

that we are doing our utmost to put them in a position in which they can weather the economic storm that we all face. That is why the Vote on Account legislation contained in the Bill is so crucial.

I will spend a moment or two reflecting on 2011-12. I have said some of this before, but I think that it bears repeating. One of the things that irks me about the way in which the media treats the Assembly is that it is as if everything is totally mismanaged and that we do not respond quickly to problems that arise and are identified. No credit is given when we get things right. I do not expect to be praised when we get things wrong; in fact, as a public representative and as a Minister, you expect people to probe at the things that you have got wrong. However, when we have done things right and managed money well and, as a result of managing money well, freed up resources that can be used to deal with particular problems, I think that it is worth repeating those successes — even though there will be those in the media in Northern Ireland, and I emphasise that it is in our media, who look for only the bad news and the negatives. Even when you do have positives, those elements look for some angle on which they can put a negative spin. I know I am repeating myself on these issues, but it is important that we look at some of the achievements in things that we had not planned to do but did, in the past year and within a tight budget.

This year, as an Executive, we were able to provide funding to ensure that student fees in Northern Ireland rose at the rate of inflation and did not make the staggering jumps that have happened in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We have continued to provide the assurances required to protect the schools end-year flexibility scheme, giving much-needed comfort to schools and allowing them to plan with confidence.

1.00 pm

As an Executive, we were able to allocate £12.7 million to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) for the Steps to Work scheme, to help those who have lost their jobs or who have not yet got a job to get into employment. We have provided 1,400 new starts in our social housing sector and allocated £25 million to co-ownership funding, which will enable many people who are starting off on the housing ladder to get and own a house

of their own for the first time. In doing that, we have provided very important funding for jobs in the construction sector. We have invested over £111 million in road structural maintenance, the highest annual spend figure ever recorded, reflecting the importance of having good transport corridors for the growth of our economy. This morning, before I came here, I read a letter from the Quarry Products Association which emphasised how important that was in ensuring that jobs in that part of the construction sector were safeguarded as a result of that spending.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. He rightly points out the importance of the construction industry to the local economy and, in particular, to the Quarry Products Association. Has he received any information from the Treasury or the European Commission in relation to the exemption for the aggregates industry? That exemption was withdrawn, and was subject to discussions in the European Commission.

Mr Wilson: As the Member well knows, I have reported to the Assembly on a number of occasions during the past year on the engagement that I have had with Treasury Ministers on that issue. All the information required by the European Commission to look at the scheme and make a decision as to whether it can be restarted is with the Commission. As yet, we do not have a response from the Commission, and I cannot say what the outcome will be. However, the ending of the credit scheme added substantially to the cost of capital projects in Northern Ireland. It probably added about £25 million to the budget for capital schemes, and it has left some uncertainty in the quarry products industry.

I do not believe that Treasury Ministers have dragged their heels on this one. One of the reasons why this has taken so long is that we wanted to present the most robust case that we possibly could to the European Commission. That meant that a lot of data had to be collected from scores of small businesses across Northern Ireland to go into our response to the Treasury.

I do not have an answer to the Member's question as to when we are expecting a response from the Commission. It was always expected that we would have a response at some time in the spring.

On our tourism side, the Titanic signature project is due to open its doors on 31 March, and it will be a focal point for the Titanic centenary

year. I believe that it will attract hundreds of thousands of visitors to Northern Ireland over the next number of years. This year, we have secured the Irish Open golf tournament for June 2012, and the associated tourism interest will be a much-needed boost for our local economy. Indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was up in your end of Northern Ireland at the weekend and many of the restaurant owners and shopkeepers in Portrush are looking forward to the injection that that will put into the local economy. I see that the local council is doing a magnificent job of improving the sea frontage there as well, which should make the area more attractive to people. I hope that that will help to bring people back after they have played their game of golf.

I could go on, but I hope that those things give a flavour of the different ways that this Assembly has delivered for our citizens, not to mention the delivery of ongoing, routine public services on a daily basis right across our country.

Moving on to 2012-13, there are, no doubt, similar challenges facing our society and economy. We, as politicians, must step up to the mark to ensure that public services are not only delivered, which is what this Vote on Account legislation intends to facilitate, but delivered to ensure that we are best serving our people.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement.

Members will be aware that the Budget Bill before us provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2011-12, as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which take account of what happened during the year's monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes a Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year, until the Main Estimates for 2012-13 are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel took evidence on the Budget Bill 2012 from Department of Finance and Personnel officials on 1 February and 8 February this year. Those evidence sessions marked the final stage of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of the 2011-12 in-year monitoring rounds.

In addition to briefings on the Department's position, following the outcome of each monitoring round, the Committee also received briefings on

the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure. After the evidence session on 8 February, the Committee recommended that the Bill be granted accelerated passage.

The Bill is about tidying up for the 2011-12 financial year and making provision for the first part of next year. However, I also want to highlight that there is a strategic context, which underpins the legislative passage of this and other such Budget Bills and goes to the heart of the relationship between the Assembly and the Executive.

Under Standing Order 42(2), the Finance and Personnel Committee exercises the unique role of determining whether there has been appropriate consultation on a Budget Bill before deciding on whether to grant a request for accelerated passage. It was against that test that the Committee granted accelerated passage for this Bill. It is on that test that decisions on future Budget Bills will be taken.

On that latter point, the Committee wrote to the Minister regarding a consultation on the upcoming review of Budget allocations for the last two years of the current four-year Budget and highlighted the need to impress upon the Executive the importance of engagement by Departments with their Committees by providing sufficient information in time for scrutiny. Members will be aware that those issues have been raised on a number of occasions by the Chairpersons' Liaison Group and a significant number of Committees.

I welcome the Minister's recent reply in which he recognised the Committee's lead role in co-ordinating the Assembly response to Budgets and financial issues. Nevertheless, to enable the Committee to carry out this role effectively, and to enable all Committees to fulfil their scrutiny function, further clarity is required on the review process, including on issues such as the methodology and the processes to be followed, the basis on which decisions regarding reallocations will be made, the process for seeking Assembly approval and a timescale for the completion of the process.

Moreover, full and timely engagement by Departments with their Committees on the detailed work behind any review proposals will be essential in ensuring effective Assembly input in the process. However, that can be addressed in the coming weeks and months. For today, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for moving the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. We have quite a bit of time to talk about this and there is no need to stop, so we will run on for as long as it takes. No; without wishing to regurgitate everything that has been said —

Mr Humphrey: Go on.

Mr Girvan: “Go on”, I am being told.

Without doing that, I want to say that, although some people had concerns about the use of accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, each Committee and Department has had an opportunity to look at and deal with the relevant areas, scrutinise the ways forward and bring that forward to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). That has been fairly well dealt with.

I have some concern about Departments that might not have satisfied their committed spend and might come back at the eleventh hour to say that they have not been able to make their full spend. That would leave us with a difficulty. I appreciate that some Departments have given money back at an early stage to allow it to be reallocated. That has been a very welcome process. I appreciate that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) handed some money back at an early enough stage so that it could be reallocated and made use of. I support the Bill.

Mr Cree: I also do not plan to detain the Minister too long. As other Members said, we discussed this matter at some length at Second Stage, Consideration Stage and, indeed, Further Consideration Stage, despite the fact that there were no amendments. So, it is not really important to rehearse those arguments.

Suffice to say that the Budget and Supply resolutions have to be passed today and I will certainly not stand in the way of that. However, I have a couple of points. As the Finance Minister himself said, it is important that the money is spent this year. It will be taken as a very bad show if Departments have not spent all the money allocated to them in this difficult year.

We also look forward to the June Estimates, when we go into the Main Estimates in more detail. No doubt, that will be good fun. However, I look forward to the time when the completion of the financial review will give us a new set of procedures that will be clear, easily understood and a big improvement for all who are trying to

follow what is a difficult subject at this time, namely, to try to make some sense of the Budget. I will certainly be voting to support the Budget Bill.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. If my memory serves me correctly, at the beginning of this budgetary process the Minister described the four-year Budget as the best Christmas present that Northern Ireland could hope for. Many disagreed with him then and maybe even more now. However, we are, as they say, where we are.

One surprising thing about last year's finances, to which the Minister referred earlier, was the high level of underspend across a number of Departments. Anyone looking in from outside would think that Northern Ireland was awash with cash at a time when public finances are facing the greatest pressures. It will be interesting to see how we fare in that respect during the coming financial year. I hope we fare much better and I know that the Minister is taking steps to review that issue. I look forward, as a member of the Finance Committee, to engaging in that process.

At the Second Stage, Mrs Kelly, myself and several others raised the issue of the childcare strategy and its roll out. The Minister replied that £12 million had been made available over the spending review period to fund the childcare strategy and that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was leading on the issue. My question is: where are we being led?

Groups in my constituency, such as the South Armagh Childcare Consortium, are living hand to mouth in constant danger of shutdown because that strategy is still not properly developed after almost a year. When spending has been allocated, it is important that the Executive ensure that it is available to groups in dire need of it as quickly as possible and without undue delays.

The Minister said that he was not going to repeat himself. I would not repeat myself either had I been given some of the responses that I had hoped for in earlier Budget debates. At the Second Stage, the Minister conveniently ignored in his responses issues that I felt needed to be answered. I asked him about the £842 million

of additional revenue, of which £500 million was to come from asset sales, which he mentioned at the beginning of the budgetary process. To date, I have not heard whether that £500 million has been realised, and I do not know where the other £342 million will come from. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the situation today and tell us whether the £500 million has been realised from assets and where the £342 million will come from. At the outset, he said that he would factor into the Budget only those figures that could be relied on. I am interested to hear his response on the issue.

1.15 pm

I also mentioned the performance of the assets management unit. To date, after one year, it has realised £1.3 million of a £10 million target, and the Minister seems to believe that the additional £6.7 million will be realised between now and the end of March. I believe that that will be very difficult. It beggars belief that the projected £100 million over the four-year budgetary period will ever be realised. Perhaps the Minister will reassure me; I await his response. However, if the performance of the unit continues as it has done to date, how will that impact on the Budget? At the rate that has been achieved to date, instead of getting £100 million over the four-year period, we are liable, if we are lucky, to get £10 million.

In an earlier debate, I raised the issue of the Minister's intention to reclassify £250 million of current expenditure as capital expenditure over the Budget period, with capital spending reaching, he said, £1.5 billion by 2014-15. Does the Minister still believe that that is achievable, and, if so, what is the progress to date?

I also raised the issue of welfare reform and said that the changes — the cuts — will take an estimated £450 million out of the Northern Ireland economy. I asked what the Executive intended to do to mitigate the effects of those changes. The Minister did not respond. I pointed out that the social protection fund had already been emptied after year 1, before the welfare cuts had even begun to bite. We cannot ignore the fact that the people of Northern Ireland will suffer because of the introduction of the consumer price index to replace the retail price index as the measure to calculate benefits. Families in the North will suffer as a result of the upcoming changes to working tax credits, and children here will suffer as a result of the

upcoming changes to child tax credits. People in Northern Ireland will end up homeless as a result of single people under the age of 35 having to change to the shared room rate of housing benefit. We can and must do more in that respect, and although the Budget has not responded to the issue, I believe that the Executive and the Minister for Social Development will have to respond in the future.

While recognising the investment that has been made in roads in the A5 and the A2, in hospitals at Omagh and Altnagelvin, and the commitment to stadia and other projects and the effect that they will have on the Northern Ireland economy, particularly on the building industry, the SDLP would like the Budget to address issues that it has missed. The promised additional income streams or capital receipts needed to mitigate the £4 billion of cuts have not been realised. We need a greater focus on job creation and plans from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Executive to mitigate the effects of welfare cuts. We also need faster progress on the devolution of corporation tax.

We also need improved output from the Executive's Budget review group.

It was possible to reallocate funds during the monitoring rounds of this financial year. I hope that the spending power of Departments vastly improves during the coming year and that we are not left in the same situation that we experienced this year, with sums of money floating around the system unspent. So, I will be interested in, and look forward to hearing, the Minister's response to points that I have raised here today and to which he has not responded in previous debates.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Following the Minister's reference to people not repeating all of their points and arguments, I, too, will generally welcome the work that has gone into presenting the Budget.

There is no such thing as the perfect article, and we have to recognise that the Minister and his officials were engaged in consultation and discussion and that they did their best — in my opinion a creditable best — to pull all of those observations and arguments together. Not everyone will be satisfied, and not everyone will have all of their concerns satisfied.

I made a number of points, one of which still concerns me. It is the definition of the term “social clauses”. DFP approached the matter of definition on two points: first, on equality, which is a statutory provision that you would expect to be reflected in contracts anyway; and, secondly, on environment, which is on the basis that we are obliged to deliver on transposed European legislation. I think that many people will be disappointed that the Assembly does not take the concept further, recognising the social and economic conditions that exist and including references to employment opportunities for the long-term unemployed and apprenticeship opportunities and allowing the interface between the Assembly and the green new deal to be broadened. Perhaps the Minister can give some comfort on the matter. I do not expect him to come up with a fully-developed position in response to a question but, perhaps, recognition that this issue is a work in progress that could be advanced through the roll-out of the Budget and the associated Programme for Government commitments.

Other than that, I am content that we have had an opportunity to be consulted and to discuss the issue. A credible job of work has been done, and I support the Budget Bill on that basis.

Mr Eastwood: We are discussing a Budget that is not linked intrinsically to the Programme for Government, leaving the potential for the Programme for Government to remain as an aspirational document.

There has also been mixed leadership on the devolution of corporation tax, with the Finance Minister seemingly opposed to greater fiscal powers while the First Minister and deputy First Minister attend meetings with the Treasury seeking them. That is clearly running against the tide of events that was set in train by the competence and confidence of the Scottish Parliament.

It seems that money unspent is the major trait in the North’s budgetary pattern. OFMDFM is no exception to that. The childcare strategy is unfinished, leaving £3 million unspent. The victims and survivors service has not yet been established, leaving half a million pounds unspent. The community relations allocation has £1.2 million unspent. The child poverty action plan remains unfinished.

There has been abject failure by OFMDFM to find the promised additional income streams

or capital receipts needed to mitigate the £4 billion of cuts. There is no specific allocation set aside, either in OFMDFM or in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), for the successful implementation of the City of Culture in Derry.

There is no detailed budgetary commitment to Derry’s One Plan, and there is no articulation of a plan to expand Magee university or to advance the other catalytic projects in the One Plan. The potential advantage of former military sites has, in many cases, been squandered, and site developments have been characterised by delays and waste.

The commitment to increase European funding by 20% is welcome, but recognition must be given to the fact that we are coming from a very low base, particularly in comparison with the South. Irish European Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn has an €80 billion innovation fund, which we badly need to utilise.

There is little or no emphasis in the Budget on reskilling workers, primarily construction workers. Initiatives have been taken in the South to provide training through the co-operation of the Education Department and social welfare offices, with hundreds of thousands of people being trained. There is no such commitment here. It is also worrying that budgetary advances in North/South terms seem to have been stalled. That needs to be remedied.

The Budget lacks any real focus on job creation, and there is a weakness in the Executive in dealing with the threats to people who are among the poorest in our society and who are threatened by the oncoming onslaught of welfare reform. The devolution of corporation tax-varying powers is moving far too slowly.

The politics of the Budget is equivalent to a splash of bright paint on a distinctly grey canvas. Political choreography cannot distract from the reality of the deficiency of good government. How can we hope to convince anyone that this Stormont leadership is capable of contending with more fiscal powers when it has shown itself to be unable to fully utilise the block expenditure that is in its possession? That is wholly in contrast to the civic confidence and devolutionary dynamic expressed and engineered by the Scottish Parliament. As our President, Michael D Higgins, reminded us recently, this financial crisis and this age of austerity are as much an intellectual crisis as

an economic crisis. It is the task of both people and politics to overcome those twin challenges.

The Budget and the style and substance of the Executive's manner of doing business are more concerned with the expediency of short-term political accolade than sustainable social and economic vision. We cannot use the argument any longer that we are but a small devolved power stranded to the will and momentum of a greater European crisis. This is a failure of both governmental duty and imagination, and it is a failure of the potential capacity that our peace promised.

Mr Wilson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will have noticed how quickly the Enterprise Minister waltzed in here and took over my desk, proceeded to spread her papers all round the place and displace me. I am now a homeless Minister, having to move to another desk. It is just typical, isn't it? She does the same when it comes to money. She comes in demanding money, and, if she does not get it, she demands my place.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank most of the Members. However, I have to make some comments on the previous two Members who took part in this Final Stage debate on the Budget Bill. As devolution grows, the House is becoming more aware of the nature and substance of these debates. Some Members need one or two reminders from me and some direction from you as to the topic in hand. That lesson still seems to have to be learned by some Members. However, I thank those who took part.

I will say to the Chairman of the Committee that I appreciate the work that the Committee has done and the support that it has given in agreeing to accelerated passage. I noted his remarks, and he has also written to me about the consultation and the process that we will go through on the review of Budgets in the last two years of this four-year Budget.

He asked about the role of Committees etc. One thing that I will say to him is that it is important that we engage, which we will, about what the process will be and how we get information on budget allocations, compare opening positions with closing positions, listen to where pressures are in other Departments' budgets and see what reallocations might have to be made during that period. As regards how Committees decide to engage in that, I do not want to be too prescriptive. Committees must

have their own freedom in how they talk to their respective Ministers and officials about the review. However, there is work to be done. The review will start when we have got to the final position in June and we know where the starting and final positions are. We will certainly have until autumn to work our way through that. As Members will know, there will be no reallocations in the next financial year. That is impossible because we will not have the data until June, which is in the middle of the financial year. So, it will be for the last two years.

1.30 pm

Mr Cree talked about how money had been spent. In a moment, I will deal with the points that were made by the SDLP on that. I must say that there seems to be a view among some Assembly Members that, if Departments give money back, somehow or other that is a failure. It is not a failure. Often, reallocations are made and money is given back because Departments have done the job that we wanted them to do, which is to look for efficiencies and ensure that money is not misused or spent unwisely. Of course, if money is not spent in one way, it is available for reallocation in others.

There are occasions — I say this despite the fact that the Minister took over my desk — when spending in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is demand-led. If demand does not materialise, the Enterprise Minister can hardly say, "Well, there is no demand, but we will give the money out anyway". In fact, she would be pilloried by the Assembly for so doing. Members need to be careful when they talk about how money was spent.

Mr Cree pointed out that, when we come to the June Estimates, we can look again at all the spending for next year. He described it as good fun. I am not sure that a debate on the Budget can be described as good fun. However, if that is fun for Mr Cree, we will look forward to it.

I want to deal with the two contributions from the —

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for giving way. Before he moves on, I want to deal with the underspend. During the current year, one Department asked for some £20 million, which it required urgently. Three months later, it actually ended up handing back £10 million. Surely there is something wrong with that system.

Mr Wilson: I am not sure what Department the Member is referring to. If he actually specified which Department it was, I may well be able to give some explanation for that. Of course, do not forget —

Mr Cree: It was the Department of Education.

Mr Wilson: I heard someone say that it was the Department of Education. I explained the arrangement that there would be for that Department. When we lost end-year flexibility, there was a fear that all the money that schools had saved from previous years would be lost. Schools began to spend money very unwisely simply to get rid of it after the previous Education Minister announced that it could be lost. At that stage, I intervened. I told schools not to spend that money unnecessarily and that we would find a mechanism by which to carry it over. The Department of Education could make a bid based on its estimation of what schools would want to spend. Schools decided that they did not want to spend all of it and wanted to carry it over into the next financial year.

My only criticism of the Department of Education is that it left it until February before it decided to surrender that money when it could have been clear earlier in the year — probably by October — which schools wanted to spend. Indeed, there should have been better monitoring. I have said that publicly. I have said that my officials will work with officials in the Department of Education to make sure that the remaining £45 million that has been saved, which is available to schools, is better managed or, at least, better monitored and that we can better predict what schools will spend.

I do not want to mix the remarks that were made by Mr McLaughlin with the two sad contributions that were made by SDLP Members. At least Mr McLaughlin recognised the realism of any Budget. He said:

“There is no such thing as the perfect article”.

He is absolutely right. Given the constraints that we work under and are forced to recognise, when we look at the Budget at a later stage, of course we could say that we could have done it better. There are things that we would like to have included but could not include; there are things that we thought would happen that did not happen; and there are things that happened that we did not expect to happen. A Budget is a living document. Our personal budgets are

like that, for goodness’ sake, never mind the £12,000 million Budget that the Executive have to spend every year. We live in a world in which there are constraints, so of course it will not be perfect.

I think that there was at least recognition from Mr McLaughlin that the Budget was not approached with some kind of gung-ho attitude. We — at least some of the parties in the Assembly — took our responsibilities seriously when it came to the Budget. We recognised that how we allocate and spend money impacts on the lives of our constituents. It impacts on their ability to get a good education, to get hospital treatment and to get the transport that they need and on a range of other things. I take from Mr McLaughlin’s remarks the fact that he and his party played a constructive role in trying to ensure that the Budget was the best article that we could produce, albeit imperfect in places. When there is a coalition, compromises are involved, and not everyone got their own way. There were things that I wanted in the Budget that I did not get, and there were things that Mr McLaughlin’s party wanted that it did not get. When there are limited resources, you have to negotiate. That is the proper way of doing it.

Mr McLaughlin also mentioned social clauses and their importance beyond the equality and health and safety issues. We have made a lot of progress in that area. Social clauses that require the taking on of apprentices and the long-term unemployed apply not only to many of the capital projects that the Executive undertake but to some of the service contracts, even though the situation is a bit more difficult in those cases. My Department awards a service contract for the maintenance of public buildings, and I think that about 40 apprenticeships — I hope I have the figure right — have been created over the four years of that contract. We are building them into the contract, although it is a bit more difficult to do that with smaller, more service-orientated contracts. Social clauses are mentioned in the Programme for Government. Indeed, when I go out to see projects in action, I ask those responsible how they have included social clauses in contracts, and there is evidence that apprentices and the long-term unemployed have been taken on as a result of conditions that were tied into those contracts. There is more work to be done in that area, and we will continue with that.

I want to move on to the two contributions that we had from the SDLP. I mentioned the negative attitude of the media, but I do not think that we need the media when we have the SDLP. If ever there was a party that seems to be mired in gloom, doom, despair and negativity, it is that party. It is not a bit of wonder that it is sinking. If I had the kind of black cloud hanging over my head that some SDLP Members have hanging over them, I would give up the will to live. Politically, that is what they have done. They have talked themselves into gloom and doom and do not see any brightness on the horizon.

No wonder they find it difficult to compete with the party beside them. It is a penalty kick. If you have people who are as demotivated as that crowd over there, you would not even have to fight an election; you could just walk past them. You would think that maybe the new blood in the SDLP might have a different attitude. However, I see that Mr Eastwood now has the master of doom and gloom sitting beside him to hold his hand and make sure that he does not get a smile on his face.

Mr Humphrey: He is the apprentice.

Mr Wilson: That is right; he is the apprentice whinger. He is the apprentice gloom and doom merchant. If Mr Bradley was bad, Mr Eastwood was worse. Let us look at some of the things that they said. Mr Bradley started off with a phrase that he loves. It is the one that I used when, shortly before Christmas 2010, I announced that we had finally reached the Budget agreement and said that it was a Christmas present for the people of Northern Ireland. It was in reference to the fact that everyone had said that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists, the DUP and Sinn Féin would never be able to agree a Budget. That was true: we could not get the other two to agree, but the two parties that had the votes to get the Budget through did so after hard negotiations. We did so not for one year to get us past the embarrassment of the election but for a four-year Budget with which we could honestly go to the people of Northern Ireland in the election the following May saying that we were not hiding anything from them. We told them what they were getting over the next four years and to vote on that basis. We were not going to make them wait until after the election and then give them the bad news. There was a degree of maturity there, and, despite the risks that were involved in getting a four-year Budget and the problems

of showing our hand for the next four years and going to the electorate, we took those risks. We believed that that was needed and that it was the kind of certainty that people were asking for, whether they were from business or the social or community sectors, the Civil Service, public bodies or the people contracted to them. We gave them that certainty. That was a good decision, and I stand over it.

I love all this from the SDLP. Just listen to what Mr Bradley said. He said that there was a high level of underspend this year and that he hoped that I would do much better next year. I do not know what he means by that. Does he mean that he does not want any underspend next year or that he does not want Departments to look for efficiencies? Does he not want to look for ways of not spending money on things that, perhaps, are not necessary and give it back so that we can better use it? This year, part of the reason for the underspend was that we cut administration costs by 3·8%. Is he hoping that we do much better next year and do not cut administration costs at all? Then he said that we had to do something about welfare reform, to help all the people who would be hurt as a result of it. I would have thought that, perhaps, if he wanted us to do something, he might make some suggestions. He made a suggestion in the previous debate, although, unfortunately, he did not repeat it today. He said that we could ask for the devolution of motor tax. Perhaps we could put motor tax up by about 15 million per cent for motorists and raise all that money to help people who are affected by welfare reform. That was the only extra source of revenue that he mentioned. He also said that we had to —

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a wee minute. He said that we had to have increased output from the Budget review group. I do not know what he means by that. He asked whether we had realised our £500 million of capital receipts. Do not forget that we are in the first year of the Budget. How naive could one be? He is asking us whether we had realised that amount in the first year of the Budget, when the property market is down and we have not even identified what some of the assets will be. He expects us to have all that realised. If you are going to whinge, at least get something of substance to whinge about before you start. That is the kind of thing that we have heard from the SDLP

1.45 pm

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for giving way. I heard him refer specifically to welfare reform, which is a crucial issue for people on benefits and people who are on working tax credit. Minister, maybe you were not here for the vote last week when the SDLP tabled a motion on welfare reform to do precisely what you suggest: to set up an ad hoc Committee to go through the reforms line by line and to deal with issues of local relevance to the many people who will be affected, including the 20% of recipients of disability living allowance who will be whacked. What happened? Your party colleagues rejected it. It is important to put that matter on record. That was an opportunity to go through it all and come up with issues that are of real relevance to the many people who are on and below the breadline. You and your colleagues rejected it.

Mr Wilson: I thought that, at least, I would get a point that would give me something to answer. I know that the SDLP is a dysfunctional party and its members do not talk to each other. They talk about each other to other people. Perhaps he should talk to his party's Minister. There is already such a group. In fact, it is a group of people who are actually capable of making decisions about this. It is an Executive ministerial group, and it has representation from all the parties on the Executive. What is it doing? It is looking precisely at that. It is considering the implications of welfare reform for Northern Ireland and what might be done.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you are being advised that I have digressed from the subject, but I have been waylaid by the SDLP I will not wander too far because I do not want you to rule me out of order.

There is such a subcommittee, and we are looking at what can and cannot be done locally. The one thing that I make quite clear is that the scaremongering of the SDLP that we will lose £600 million in welfare benefits and that half of the population will be on the poverty line or on the streets and children will be in poverty is so much nonsense. The SDLP cannot credibly produce a figure that shows that £600 million will be taken out of the economy as a result of welfare reform. That is not true. There are things that we can and must do, but, equally, we have to recognise that there are things that we could not afford to do. Westminster has made it clear that, while we hold to parity in the levels of

welfare payments, it will fund the bill. Once we move from parity, we can fund it ourselves. No increase in motor tax will ever give us enough revenue to do that job.

As he did before, the Member raised the issue of childcare and the child strategy. He rightly said that it is the responsibility of OFMDFM and that only £300,000 of the £3 million was spent this year. The Executive have given approval to carry over the underspend to next year, when the strategy will be agreed and the allocations can be made. SDLP Members love to poke OFMDFM on that, but I guarantee that, if OFMDFM had rushed in, in spite of the fact that there are widespread and different views on how that money should be spent, with a scheme that did not have buy-in from all the people who will be affected, the SDLP would have been the first to complain about lack of consultation and the heavy-handed way in which the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the two leading parties in the Assembly impose their will on everyone. When you take time to bring along all the players, you get complaints about why you have not spent the money. You cannot have it both ways. Either you want to bring people along and you recognise that that takes time, or else you rush in and say, "Right, this is what the scheme will be", and you are accused of being heavy-handed and disregarding the views of the people. If something goes wrong with the scheme or the money is not spent in a way that people like, they will probably say, "Did we not tell you so?"

The Member raised the issue of the additional revenue for capital receipts and the fact that the asset management unit has not raised the £10 million that it was to raise this year. I drew that to the Assembly's attention. I did not have to do that. Nobody asked me a question about it, but I brought it to the Assembly's attention because I wanted to make it quite clear. We set challenging targets for raising revenue from assets, and there was a process to go through in identifying what those assets might be and getting them on to the market and sold. We are selling them at a particularly difficult time. In the past year, £50 million of the £100 million was allocated because we wanted to give time for the market to, hopefully, improve so that we could raise those sales.

The Member talked about the other £500 million. It is totally naïve for anyone to think that we will raise £500 million in one year.

I never made such a claim; no Executive Minister did. The assets are to be realised by Departments. Here is a real discipline on it: many of those assets have been built into Departments' capital programmes. So, there is an incentive for Departments, which, first, identified the assets themselves. We did not identify them. I did not identify them. They were identified by Departments, and Departments then built them into their programmes. If they do not realise them, they will, of course, suffer the consequences of that. However, the important thing is that they were put in only after Departments had identified that they were surplus to requirements and were marketable. Over the period, we will be able to realise the money from them.

The Member asked whether we had gone askew already, about what the capital spend is — it is £1.4 million in the past year, not £1.5 million — and about the performance to date. Had he been listening to the debate, he would have known that the reason why we have the spring Supplementary Estimates and why we do not know the final budgetary position is that we will not know the final spend of Departments probably until about June of next year. However, no Department so far has indicated a substantial capital underspend in this year, apart from the Department of Justice, which is exempt from having to give money back. I am fairly sure that, when the figures turn out, we will have spent our £1.1 billion this year, and some of that, of course, will have been financed by capital receipts that Departments brought in.

Mr McLaughlin: I want to ask about the capital receipts and the disposal of surplus assets. The market is volatile and is continuing to settle. We have already had a commitment in the Budget review for the final two years. I wonder if there is built in a review of the value of the assets to Departments, which may have made a projection that perhaps the market in its present volatility is not supporting and is having the effect of maybe preventing people implementing.

Mr Wilson: It does not even have to be a formal review such as that which Member talked about. If an asset has been put up for sale and expressions of interest have been made, those expressions of interest may not necessarily reflect the value that had been put on the asset by LPS and, therefore, the value in the Department's accounts. Very often — I can think of ones that I have looked at recently

— that Department will simply negotiate with the potential buyer. There have to be limits to that negotiation. If a ludicrous figure comes in, of course we would not expect to give it away. I can think of examples that came across my desk recently where the asset might have been valued at, say, £500,000 and, in the end, went for a sum less than that, but that was as a result of negotiation. I do not think that any Department will hold out if it does not get the final penny for an asset that has been put on the market. We do not need that to be widespread; it can be done on a one-to-one basis.

I come to the points that Mr Eastwood raised. It is sad to see that someone so young has got himself into a state of despair. Usually, the youth have idealism that lifts them beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves and helps to pull them out of the mud and the mire and look to the horizon for a brighter future. However, I am afraid that the young people of the SDLP have their eyes as firmly on the ground as some of the older members who have been beaten and battered by electoral defeat after electoral defeat and have therefore got into a negative attitude. He spoke about a number of things, including the unspent money. However, I have made the point that unspent money does not mean bad management; unspent money could actually be the result of good management.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will. Indeed, the instances that I have given have shown that it was actually the result of good management.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. At the risk of appearing as the sorcerer with my apprentice to my left, I would say that the issue of underspends has been raised by the Minister himself, to the extent that he has initiated a review of departmental spending. He is far from satisfied with the underspends that occurred during this financial year. I did not say that the £500 million in assets should be raised within one year; however, it is clear that progress in realising those assets has been very poor. It is also clear that the assets will not be realised over the budgetary period. I would like the Minister to bear that in mind and tell us how it will impact on the Budget.

Mr Wilson: I noted what the Member said. He asked whether the £500 million had been realised and said that he did not believe that

it had. The answer is that no, it has not; it was spread over the four-year period. I have told the Member that, as far as this year's capital spend is concerned, no Department has made me aware that it will substantially underspend on its capital budget. Some of that capital budget will, of course, have been predicated on receipts that it will have brought in.

I raised the issue of the high level of underspend in two contexts. Of course we will review it. In allocating money, if we can identify early where Departments may have been allocated more money than is needed, we can plan better for spending, hence the Budget review. The other underspend that I spoke about is where Departments hold on to money until the last minute and then find that they cannot spend it. Since we can carry over only £60 million, there is a danger that we could lose money if we are left with too much of it. That is one of the reasons that you need early warning of underspend, and Departments are well aware of that.

As I said, Mr Eastwood needs to lift his eyes to the horizon. He mentioned the underspend. He also said — I loved this — that we have lost the potential of the former military sites. Does he ever look around him in Londonderry? Only recently, they were celebrating the link across the river into Ebrington, the new square that will be available for the City of Culture, the vast amounts of money that have been spent on that, the plans for all the land behind it and the application for Fort George under INTERREG IVa.

Indeed, that is one application that I recently discussed with the Northern Ireland Science Park, which is keen to see that happen. Hopefully, all the information required will be produced to enable that to go ahead.

2.00 pm

The Member complains, but there are only two military sites in Londonderry that I know of — Fort George and Ebrington. Money is being spent on one and active consideration is being given to a grant application for an exciting science park on the other. What more does he want? Does he just want an opportunity to gurn? That seems to be what this is all about. If he is going to pick a target to have a go at, he should at least pick one with some substance to it. There is no substance to those that he has chosen.

The Member went on to say that we have wasted opportunities in reskilling workers. As in

the answer I gave to Mr McLaughlin, we already demand the reskilling of workers in public sector contracts. We include apprenticeship clauses and clauses to ensure the employment of long-term unemployed people in order to give them opportunities to gain skills. The Employment and Learning Minister, in the final act of budgetary allocations last year, got £12.7 million purely for the Steps to Work programme. He is now working on a document that he will bring to the Executive to try to get funding for young unemployed people so that we can do what we have to do to get those people into work. He and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have already been successful in so far as this is the only region in the United Kingdom, as far as I know, where youth unemployment has fallen over the past year. There is nothing to the Member's allegations.

The Member then said — I loved this one — that the Finance Minister is against any devolution of taxes, yet the First Minister and deputy First Minister were discussing the devolution of corporation tax. — *[Interruption.]*

Well, first, I have made my position clear in the Assembly time and again. It is the same as that in the Programme for Government, which is that if we are going to devolve corporation tax, it must be devolved at a price that is affordable. However, having said that we are slow in looking for the devolution of taxes and that we should be more like Scotland, his final sally against us was that we had not reached the state of maturity where we could handle the devolution of any taxes. The Member should make his mind up.

I know that I have digressed, and I will come back to the point now, Mr Deputy Speaker. I only make these points to show that if the SDLP wishes to paint itself as the party of opposition in government, which appears to be the role that it wants, it should have some credibility to its opposition. Let us not have this contradiction and picking of targets that are not targets at all. Let us have some recognition that, as Mr McLaughlin said, there will be imperfections but we live in an imperfect world. We are not always going to get it right, and we are going to live within constraints. At least that may be a more realistic approach than the one that the SDLP has adopted.

Having had that general moan, I have talked myself into gloominess through listening to that crowd. I thank Members for their contributions,

even the ones who made the contributions that I had to barge them about. This is the Final Stage in a long process that began with the Budget 2011-15, and will be followed by the Main Estimates in June. There will be three monitoring rounds for this legislative phase of 2011-12, and then the review of final processes that the House debated on 13 February. We will seek to streamline the process, and I look forward to how that unfolds in the future.

We are near the end of the first year of what has been a challenging Budget. I think we have worked our way through it in a commendable manner, and I look forward to the same performance in the following year. I, therefore, commend the 2012 Budget Bill to Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will move to a brighter note — the vote. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, cross-community support is required.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 4/11-15] do now pass.

Private Members' Business

Decade of Centenaries

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the number of centenaries of significant historic events affecting the UK and Ireland in the next 10 years; calls on the Executive to ensure that these are marked in an inclusive manner; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work together, with the British and Irish Governments, to develop a co-ordinated approach to the commemoration of these important events in our shared history.

I welcome the opportunity to propose the motion on the forthcoming decade of centenaries. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the junior Minister from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their presence in the House today. I recognise that a fair amount of preparatory work has already commenced on a number of key events. The decade will mark the centenary of a number of seminal events in the history of the UK and Ireland.

The period could be said to commence with the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912 through to the home rule era, which covers the period of the First World War, from 1914 to 1918, including the battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising in 1916, and culminating in the war of independence, the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and partition between 1919 and 1922.

During that period, we also had an event of huge importance to my constituency — the construction and tragic sinking of the Titanic in 1912. I commend the Executive and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for the work that has gone in to celebrating and commemorating the event and all the connected work at the Titanic Quarter, including the innovative, recently established Dock Church,

which, I understand, is set to feature on 'Songs of Praise'.

This decade also saw a Gaelic revival and the rise of the women's suffrage movement and the labour movement, out of which came universal male and limited women's suffrage in 1918. It was a pivotal moment in our democratic history and a development that must be given central place in any decade of commemoration.

The era also saw the formation of the Irish Citizen Army, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteer Force. Therefore, the period presents a unique opportunity to commemorate and to explore historic events that shape our present in a profound manner, and it presents a challenge to ensure that it is done in a shared and inclusive way, maximising social and economic benefit for our community.

The challenge is whether we can explore that past together in a way that aids understanding through education and discussion in order to learn from our past and to help us to inform the possibility of a shared and better future. Should we fail in that challenge, there is potential for a divisive period rather than one that is focused on future progress. The degree of maturity displayed over the coming 10 years in how we look at the past will shape how we live in the future.

From the Alliance Party's perspective, it is important that people have the opportunity to engage with aspects of our history with which they would not traditionally associate themselves and to consider alternative perspectives on those events so that no single narrative crowds out all other opinions. Therefore, it is important that both Governments are also involved in marking events throughout this period, and not just in aspects that are of most relevance to their own jurisdiction. Both Governments need to be involved, as both Governments were heavily involved in the original events.

Mr Humphrey: I do not disagree with the Member that Governments need to be involved, but does he agree that when Governments set up advisory groups, those groups should be representative and reflective of society in Northern Ireland and should not be made up of hand-picked people and have predetermined outcomes?

Mr Lyttle: I certainly agree that we should approach these events and commemorations in

an inclusive manner. I believe that that is what the Member was asking, and the Alliance Party certainly supports that approach.

The transformative power of respectful commemoration based on inclusion and diversity is reflected in the guidance notes developed by the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund for the period, entitled 'Remembering the Future'. They have stated that the way in which these and other events are marked in public, as opposed to private space, will chart the progress that this society is making on its journey out of conflict. The anniversaries need not be mutually exclusive. Indeed, if the commemorations are handled sensitively, they will provide an opportunity to underline how much of our history is shared.

We should, however, be aware that for many people these events are, perhaps, as irrelevant to them as this House is. We should look at this as an opportunity to connect with people on important historic events that mean a great deal to many people, in a way that crafts an inclusive citizenship for Northern Ireland.

The Council of Europe White Paper on intercultural dialogue argues that civic participation and dialogue are vital elements to any healthy democracy. That can allow us to deal with different perspectives constructively and seek a basis for a more shared citizenship. Working with the British and Irish Governments, along with the Assembly, local councils and other interested groups, all of which are already planning for the upcoming period to varying degrees, can set the tone for how events are marked and ensure that certain principles apply. Those principles include placing events in an inclusive and shared framework and looking to the wider history and context of the time in these islands and across Europe, rather than allowing celebrations to be fragmented by marking individual centenaries.

Belfast City Council has laid down a useful benchmark for collaborative working on the issue, through establishing the commemorations and memorabilia working group. Rather than focusing on individual events, that cross-party group has framed a programme divided into three chronological periods. The first, 'Shared History, Differing Allegiances' covers 1912-14; the second, which covers 1914-18, includes World War I, the battle of the Somme and

the Easter Rising; and the third will cover the events surrounding the partition of Ireland. It is that type of thoughtful approach to the civic commemoration of those events that is a good example of cross-party working. The Alliance Party believes that other work can be based on that.

The highly successful state visit of the Queen to Ireland, hosted by former President Mary McAleese, was another fantastic example of how a co-ordinated approach can produce positive results for community relations. The visit made a tangible contribution to cohesion, sharing and integration throughout these islands, and the success of that historic visit teaches us important lessons about how to maximise the benefit of unique opportunities.

Such events are not spontaneous. They require a mix of detailed planning, careful management, sensitive choreography and, perhaps most importantly, strong political leadership. As such, I call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Culture Minister, the Enterprise Minister and the Executive to work together with the British and Irish Governments to develop a co-ordinated approach to the commemoration of the upcoming centenaries, all of which represent important events in our shared history.

As the Enterprise Minister well knows, Northern Ireland is becoming an exceptional tourist destination, boosted significantly by a number of key international events, including the MTV Europe Music Awards and what I think is an excellent advertising campaign, NI 2012: Our Time, Our Place. It is great to see local acts and produce involved in that advertising campaign.

As mentioned earlier, I am delighted that my constituency, East Belfast, will have the new Titanic visitors' centre, which is due to open in April. We want to invite international guests to join us in commemorating all the events in a shared manner.

We in the Assembly must play our role in this important period, in partnership with wider society. The co-ordination of commemoration activity throughout these islands and close collaboration between tourist boards, the arts sector, business and civil society can help us to maximise the benefits of the coming period and to contribute to a legacy of social and economic growth for the region.

These events present us with a unique opportunity to commemorate centenaries that

are important to many people in a way that delivers a transition to a new era of a shared society, where the focus shifts increasingly towards healing divisions, building cohesion and integration and addressing our joint economic challenges. In our opinion, that will require a united approach, and I hope the Assembly takes the opportunity to demonstrate such unity of purpose by fully supporting the motion.

2.15 pm

Mr Moutray: As the motion reminds us, we are on the cusp of a hugely significant decade of centenaries. Already, there has been much talk, debate and discussion about the various events. Some lists of events are longer than others and some seem to include events of much less significance than others. Perhaps that is an effort to maintain some sort of balance. However, there is no doubt that the events that occurred between 1912 and 1922 in Britain and Ireland are among the most significant and pivotal in the modern history of these islands.

The motion seeks to place the key events relating to Ulster in the broader context of the UK and Ireland and, by doing so, the proposers are developing a theme raised by their MP, Naomi Long, in a short debate on "Centenaries (UK and Ireland)" in Westminster Hall back in December 2011. I see some merit in that broader approach. Many of the key centenaries will require very careful handling if we are to secure the right outcome. We need to involve our national Parliament at Westminster. The events we are talking about have shaped the nature and direction of the subsequent history of these islands in a way that those who lived through them would probably never have contemplated. Importantly, as we know, they continue to shape and mould us today. The issues surrounding those centenaries remain very potent and powerful, exciting strong passions and views. They are a bit like nuclear energy: they have the potential either to deliver a positive and constructive outcome or a negative and destructive one.

Apart from the Commons debate to which I referred, I read what the former Taoiseach Brian Cowen had to say in his speech of May 2010, entitled "A Decade of Commemorations: Commemorating Our Shared History" and the Community Relations Council's report on marking anniversaries. I find much in those

that I agree with. We want to ensure that we remember our past sensitively and rationally, and in a way that can command maximum cross-community support. There have been encouraging signs, only this weekend, from some within the House.

Her Majesty's visit to the Irish Republic last year was a huge success, and I welcome last week's statement by Danny Murphy of the GAA that the GAA will attend any centenary event to which it is invited. That is a significant step in the right direction and it contrasts sharply with the absence of all but one of the Ulster GAA counties when Her Majesty was at Croke Park. Perhaps, slowly but surely, we are making some progress. I also welcome the very belated moves in the Irish Republic towards recognising the contribution of Irish soldiers who fought for the cause of freedom and democracy in two world wars. That will greatly help in relation to the centenaries of the outbreak of war in 1914 and of the battle of the Somme in 1916.

As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Industry Committee, I am very aware of the great interest that tourists have in our past. Centenaries offer tremendous tourism potential and we must tap into all that. The first centenary is coming very soon and, like many of those that will follow, has great potential to unite us all. The Titanic, which sank on the night of 14 April 1912, holds the entire world captive to this day. The extent of the Titanic legend is truly amazing and we are looking forward to the opening of the new Titanic visitors' centre in Belfast. However, I echo the words of Billy Kennedy in the 'News Letter', who said that we must never give the impression of celebration when it comes to the Titanic, for it is a story of great human tragedy that needs to be told sensitively and compassionately.

As to other centenaries, we will undoubtedly have differing opinions. However, I am all for good neighbourliness and am happy to see peace and reconciliation between unionists and nationalists, North and South, in the UK and Ireland. However, just as my forefathers stoutly upheld their right of self-determination and resisted home rule, so am I determined that, when we come to 2021, we will not only mark the centenary of Northern Ireland but look forward with great confidence to its next hundred years.

We need to embark on the marking of centenaries on a realistic basis, and the historic wounds of our two communities are still very much felt. Every year, as the Twelfth of July comes round, there are those who attack and ridicule the faith, culture and history of the Protestant unionist people, and condemn us as sectarian bigots. That hardly fills me with confidence. When I see that every year, how am I —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Moutray: When I see that every year, how does it engender confidence for moving forward and for the future?

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank our Alliance colleagues for providing us with this opportunity, which is, and which should be seen as, the start of a process.

There are many issues to be addressed in this decade of centenary commemorations. Clearly, if we decide on that approach, those issues have the enormous potential to create further division and tension in our community. However, if the intention is, in fact, to promote greater understanding, that need not be the outcome. So, we should see all these anniversaries in that context.

The centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant next year is an opportunity. It is one of the early commemorations, but there are other issues —

Mr Humphrey: The covenant was signed 100 years ago this year.

Mr McLaughlin: That demonstrates my point: we have a lot to learn about each other. My understanding is that the covenant was signed on 28 September 1912. Is that correct? That is the date that I had in my mind.

Mr Humphrey: Yes.

Mr McLaughlin: The point, therefore, is that we would learn from each other, and we should. Perhaps the hard words that we normally heard and their noise and clamour happened because people did not have the confidence that what they had to say would be heard or understood. We all have a responsibility, not just for the past but for taking this opportunity. In my view, that is a responsibility.

I want to make it clear on behalf of my party that we will participate in many of these events, including those that reflect the unionist tradition, and that we will do that as far as is possible for us. We should engage at leadership level in the Executive and in both Governments — the Irish Government and the British Government — to ensure that there is an opportunity to learn about each other's past, the reasons for the decisions that people in those contemporary circumstances made and any outworking that is relevant to the times that we live in.

We are in a different place as a community. However, we can see from the peace walls how difficult it is for people to move past that. It is tremendously difficult. There is no point in people making glib accusations. In the most constructive way that I can, I will say to our Alliance colleagues that talking about the cost of division is only a commentary and that we need a practical example of how we can start to break down those divisions.

This period of centenary anniversaries covers an extended time, including a number of Assembly terms. Through the discussions that we could have in that time, we could do a tremendous job of work in peace and reconciliation, to use that expression, to give greater understanding and to demonstrate that people can work together to tease out these issues, understand them and learn from each other. I also think that we have a bit of un-learning to do of the perceptions that have guided us in our lives thus far.

Let me put that commitment on the table. My party has already established a working group. We want to engage positively with every single political and cultural expression in this region, and we want to see a discussion that encompasses not just the island of Ireland but the island of Britain.

To round this off, in my opinion, the royal visit to the Twenty-six Counties was a very positive development. It affected me tremendously how effectively that was brought forward, despite my worries that it was perhaps premature. The generosity of spirit of people who attended those events and of the leaders — the Queen and the President of Ireland — made a tremendous contribution to the search for a more settled and peaceful society on the island of Ireland. They addressed our historical differences, as well as those issues where we

can mutually benefit from understanding each other's position.

So, let us move forward and take those opportunities. In fact, let us seize those opportunities to demonstrate that we can hear each other when we are speaking and we do not have to shout to be heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Robin Swann.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Youth Unemployment

1. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his plans to tackle youth unemployment. (AQO 1387/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Youth unemployment brings its own challenges. Young people risk being denied the opportunity to apply their recently acquired skills. A particular problem faced by young people is having insufficient experience to compete for job vacancies, and it is difficult to get such experience without having a job. There is a danger that young people will be lost to long-term unemployment. Any lost generation would pose a major threat to the future development of our economy.

As I said at my previous Question Time, I have proposed to the Executive an additional range of measures designed to help to tackle youth unemployment. Executive colleagues raised some points of detail, which I am addressing. When the Executive have agreed the package of measures, I will make a full statement on the proposals to the Assembly.

I believe that the package that I have proposed will make a significant contribution to linking social and economic policy by building the skills base of our unemployed young people to prepare them for the jobs that will rebuild and rebalance the economy.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, on 8 June 2011 in Committee, you stated:

“We recognise that the Committee has an important role to play not just in scrutinising what the Department is doing but also as a partner in the development of policy.”

Can you explain to the House why you have not brought those issues to the Committee

for discussion? Can you tell us whether the proposals that you have shared with Executive colleagues are going to be a rehash of what is going on in the rest of the United Kingdom or whether you have some innovative thinking to bring to the matter?

Dr Farry: Mr McCrea raised a couple of questions, and I will try to address both of them.

If the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning wants to invite my officials to brief the Committee on this important matter, I am more than happy to make them available. The Committee has asked for a whole host of briefings on matters small and, occasionally, on matters large. Certainly, on this large matter, I would welcome the Committee having a discussion. Of course, the Committee will appreciate that it is for the Executive to determine the policy in the first instance. That is where agreement has to be found, as an Executive matter. After that we look to the Finance Minister for resources.

Secondly, although we are mindful of policies being developed in the rest of the United Kingdom, we are a devolved region and do not slavishly follow what happens in other jurisdictions. However, we will take on board the lessons from what is working in the rest of the UK. I am keen to add a premium of additionality that is linked to our economy. My proposals are very much linked to the priority skills areas that we have in Northern Ireland. This is not simply about dealing with unemployment, it is about an investment in the future of our economy by ensuring that we invest in the right areas in which growth is going to be highest in the years to come.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Minister's Department carried out any assessment of the number of young people who have emigrated, particularly from rural areas, in search of work? Does the Department have a strategy for tackling youth unemployment in rural areas?

Dr Farry: I am aware of the issues that Mr McElduff raises. It is difficult to give a precise figure for emigration. The Northern Ireland Executive are not responsible for monitoring those issues, but we are aware of them anecdotally. I am mindful of making sure that a full suite of policies is in place across Northern Ireland, for urban and rural areas. Mr McElduff will be aware, for example, that we rolled out

the Local Employment Intermediary Service — LEMIS — project in areas such as Cookstown and Moyle recently, so we recognise the fact that there are pockets of disadvantage in some rural areas in which we need to make some very particular interventions.

Mr Eastwood: What progress has been made in creating a tracking system for NEET young people?

Dr Farry: Youth unemployment is an aspect of the NEETs issue. In some respects, the paper that I am putting forward will try to set out some measures to deal with that. Ultimately, we are working towards a NEETs strategy, which I intend to bring to the Executive around April. It is more than simply a response from my Department; it will have to be a cross-departmental initiative involving a number of Departments, including the Departments of Health and Education in particular. So, we are working towards that objective, and I am very conscious that I have the support of my ministerial colleagues in ensuring that we bring this important piece of work to fruition very soon.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

DEL: Dissolution

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to preparations for the dissolution of his Department.

(AQO 1389/11-15)

Dr Farry: My conversations with the First Minister and deputy First Minister reflect my broader comments on the proposed dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Personally, I believe that there should be a rationalisation of the number of Departments. That includes the creation of a Department of the economy. I think that we should approach the reduction of Departments responsibly, making changes for the best reasons of policy coherence and effective service delivery, rather than political considerations. I do not believe that this can be achieved through examining one Department in isolation.

I have also been clear that all the functions exercised by my Department sit together and are fully integrated. This is based around a common agenda of skills, including the development of the skills of those coming into

the labour market, through our further education colleges and universities; those who are in the workplace, through upskilling and reskilling; and those who are unemployed or economically inactive, to get and keep a job.

It is imperative that skills policy and skills delivery, through our providers, including further education and higher education, be in an economic Department. Furthermore, what we do in terms of skills is absolutely critical to the future development of our economy and we must ensure that we do not undermine our competitive cutting edge. It is, therefore, important that the functions of DEL be preserved together, either within a dedicated Department or a larger Department of the economy, where skills would interface with the other key drivers of economic transformation.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister announced that they will be consulting stakeholders on the future of the Department.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Is he concerned about the effect that these uncertainties are having on his staff and, as he has suggested, the staff in other Departments? Is it not time to get certainty on this matter.

Dr Farry: At present, my sole focus as Minister is on exercising the functions of my Department. I am not being deflected from that one bit. That also applies to my officials and staff. They are aware that they have a job to do in providing a service to the people of Northern Ireland. They are, equally, singularly focused on their responsibilities and on ensuring they they do not take their eyes off the ball.

Ultimately, departmental employees appreciate that they are employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and that will be recognised in the future. Great efforts have been made by my permanent secretary and me to explain to departmental staff what is happening and to reassure them regarding their futures.

Mr Campbell: There appear to be problems afflicting Alliance Departments. To be fair to this Alliance Minister, they are not of his making. Will he outline to the House, and to the wider Northern Ireland public, any preliminary discussions that he has had with his Executive colleagues in preparation for what he now knows is inevitably ahead?

Dr Farry: First, both Alliance Ministers are doing the jobs asked of them by the Northern Ireland electorate and the Members of the House. Neither of us is being deflected from our actions. Secondly, as the Member is aware, discussions between Ministers are confidential, and it would not be appropriate for me to refer to them on the Floor of the House.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister accept that there is a very strong argument for aligning further education with the Department of Education, and that that is the strongest place for it to be? Also, it would not become the poor relation, which is something I think you referred to earlier.

Dr Farry: I thank the Mr Kelly for his question. At present, there is a major interface between my Department and the Department of Education, and it is mostly in service delivery and regulatory matters. As much as we are resolving those issues perfectly well today, that will always be the case no matter what arrangements come to pass.

The most compelling thing that I am aware of, and that I am sure all Members and those who work in the FE and higher education sectors are aware of, is the importance of the links between FE and HE and the business sector, particularly regarding the identification of businesses' particular skills needs and ensuring that the research and development that occurs in the FE or higher education sector is relevant to the needs of business and that we have effective knowledge transfer.

The most important interface in moving Northern Ireland forward is to ensure that what happens in further education and higher education is linked to the economy and that all the drivers of the economy relate properly to one another and are not fragmented. To do otherwise, I fear, would run the risk of undermining what we are doing in Northern Ireland. Skills are the most important offering that we have to attract inward investment and enable local companies to grow. If we send out a negative message about what we are doing on skills, we will set back the very important initiatives that the Executive have taken forward in relation to the economy, in particular through the economic strategy.

Mr Allister: Given that expediency rather than strategy attended the announcement of the dissolution of DEL, has the Minister any confidence that the same expediency will not

attend the distribution of its functions in a carve-up between a DUP Department and a Sinn Féin Department, rather than a strategic vision such as he has given of a Department for the economy? When does he expect it to happen?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Allister for his question. He will be aware, as the House will be aware, that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have announced that they intend to take the views of a number of key stakeholders in Northern Ireland society. My Department, alongside other Departments, has been asked to make suggestions as to who they should take views from. Equally, the Committee for Employment and Learning is engaging in its own exercise. I expect that, before any decision is made on the future of the Department and before any distribution of the Department's functions, proper and due consideration will be given to those views. Members will already be very clear that a large number of organisations have expressed a desire to see economic coherence in how we move forward.

DEL: Programme for Government and Economic Strategy

4. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what role his Department has had in informing the draft Programme for Government and the draft economic strategy.
(AQO 1390/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has engaged fully in the development of the draft economic strategy and the draft Programme for Government. Through my role in the Executive, I have played an active part in the development of the Programme for Government. I am also a member of the Executive subcommittee on the economy, which oversaw the drafting of the economic strategy. At official level, the Department's permanent secretary sits on the economic strategy steering group, while the Department's senior economist is a member of the economic strategy working group. I am pleased that the strategy recognises the central importance of skills, employment and innovation to our future economic success and the development of our society.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, can you detail the importance of skills to meeting the Executive's aims of rebuilding the economy in the short term and rebalancing our economy in the long term?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. He is right to identify the two different strands of activity that we are engaged with. One is the short-term rebuilding of our economy and ensuring that we deal with the current economic situation and maximise employment levels. Only today, I announced that we have reprioritised tourism as a priority skill area in reflection of the important opportunities for job creation in that area linked to events this year and in the future.

In a broader sense, skills are the key driver of our economy. We have too many people with low or no qualifications. On the other hand, my skills strategy identifies the need for a significant uplift in, and demand for, higher-level skills through to 2020. The Programme for Government, the economic strategy and my Department's internal documents all reflect those strategic objectives. We have a full suite of policies that are working to ensure that we can meet those objectives.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra a thug sé dúinn. I thank the Minister for the answers that he has given us. I suppose the question I have is whether the Minister believes that there is proper awareness at the Executive table of particular job retention problems facing rural communities, particularly in the construction and engineering sectors.

2.45 pm

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for her question. I think that there is recognition of the need to ensure that we have a balanced approach to the future of Northern Ireland. The Member will appreciate that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who is a party colleague of hers, has particular responsibility in that regard. She gave her views to the economic subcommittee, and they are reflected in the strategy.

With regard to some of the more specific things that she mentioned, I said in response to her colleague that we have rolled out LEMIS to Cookstown and Moyle. We are also mindful of the need to retrain workers in other areas.

The Member also mentioned engineering. Representatives of employers have contacted me on that, and my officials are scoping the matter out to see whether we need to make some targeted interventions in support of the

engineering sector in Northern Ireland, which, as the Member knows, is critical to the future of our economy.

Mrs Overend: Given that only four of the Executive's key commitments relate to his Department, is the Minister satisfied that enough account has been taken of the importance of DEL's functions in growing the economy?

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. It is important that we focus on the quality, rather than the quantity, of the targets. Indeed, the Department of Health, which is a major spending Department, has only five or six targets.

I will draw attention to the nature of my targets in the Programme for Government and highlight two. One relates to the 200,000 qualifications that we are seeking to achieve at level 2 and above. That is a major target not just for my Department but for the Executive, and it is critical to upskilling the workforce in Northern Ireland. We also have the target of achieving 114,000 people going into work by 2015. That target raised a number of eyebrows, but I believe that we have to focus on it. Getting people into work is a central objective of my Department, and it must also be a central objective of the Executive and Assembly. It would certainly be strange not to have a target for that. My Department met a similar target in the previous Programme for Government, and it is important that we continue to push ourselves harder and faster in that regard. That target is critical to the coherence and credibility of the Programme for Government, and I am pleased that it is there.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, do you have any assurances that your targets in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy will be retained once the Department is dissolved? Do you believe in the principle of participative democracy and, therefore, that the people should have a say in the future shape of the Department?

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Kelly for her supplementary question. A lot of people seem to be writing off the Department. I stress that we have not gone away, you know. We are here, and we continue to function. We have a massive in tray of issues, and I am continuing to work my way through them all. The targets that the Member refers to are in the Programme for Government. It is the Executive's Programme for Government and the Executive's economic

strategy. Those targets will remain, no matter what happens.

Universities Ireland

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the current priorities, focus and work programme of Universities Ireland. (AQO 1391/11-15)

Dr Farry: The role of Universities Ireland is to promote co-operation and collaboration among the nine universities on the island of Ireland and to enhance their reputations in Europe and overseas. Universities Ireland provides a unique service to the higher education sector in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and it enhances the reputations of the institutions in both jurisdictions. Its current priorities and activities focus on business sponsorship for North/South masters scholarships; student debates on current topics that are related to the island of Ireland; fellowships for young historians studying the 1912-1922 period; representing the island of Ireland's higher education sector through the Scholars at Risk international network, which provides support to academics who are at risk of persecution in their own countries; and supporting the Irish-African Partnership for Research Capacity Building. Work is also planned with universities in Scotland to prepare a programme of joint activities, particularly in the area of research.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. I notice that he did not mention the student flow from the North to the South, and vice versa. Does he share the concern that has been expressed in the Irish Business and Employers Confederation/Confederation of British Industry (IBEC/CBI) report, which identified that as a major area of concern? Can he outline what steps his Department is taking, particularly with regard to career advice, to try to increase the numbers?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCartney for his supplementary question. I should explain that the original question applies to Universities Ireland as an organisation. However, with regard to the wider issue that he identifies, I am certainly mindful of the IBEC/CBI report. My officials have been in touch with their counterparts in the Department of Education

and Skills in Ireland. I also raised the issue with my counterpart, Ruairí Quinn, and we discussed the matter. I agree with the central conclusion that, with regard to student flows between the North and the South in both directions, that particular market is underdeveloped compared with flows in other directions across these islands. We are certainly looking at what we can do to ensure that there is a more level playing field, that students in all jurisdictions can make informed decisions about courses that are available and that qualifications in different jurisdictions are understood properly by receiving institutions in order to liberalise that flow of students.

Mr Nesbitt: In his answers, the Minister referenced Universities Ireland and universities in Scotland. Have we nothing to learn from universities in England and Wales?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Nesbitt for his question. Perhaps I am slightly strange in the Chamber because I actually try to answer the questions that are put to me and relate my answers to the jurisdictions that they refer to. Certainly, universities here operate in networks that are available throughout these islands and further afield. Obviously, they are not even just linked. The University of Ulster has developed its Confucius Institute. Therefore, it is now breaking out into China. *[Laughter.]* It overflowed England and Wales. There are links with all parts of these islands and further afield. Obviously, both universities are autonomous institutions. They are keen to develop their links with all other jurisdictions whether they be at home or further afield. We are concluding the higher education strategy. One of its key themes will be links beyond Northern Ireland — both domestic links and international links. So, I think that Mr Nesbitt will be encouraged by what he sees in due course.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. Can the Minister provide clarification on whether, in fact, his Department has been in touch with other third-level institutions with regard to the dissolution of DEL?

Dr Farry: That question is a bit of a stretch. My Department deals with institutions and universities in Northern Ireland, of which there are three — the Open University being the third in case anyone is wondering. It is not my Department's responsibility to interact with

universities in different jurisdictions directly. Universities will have their own bilateral relationships.

Mr Speaker: I warn Members that supplementary questions should relate to the original question. Some Members are stretching it.

Higher Education: Regional Colleges

6. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to ensure that regional colleges are able to deliver a higher percentage of higher education provision. (AQO 1392/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am fully committed to further education colleges delivering higher education courses. I believe that they are best placed to meet the higher technician and associate professional skills needs of employers through provision of intermediate higher level courses such as foundation degrees. To that end, targets have been set in the skills strategy, Success through Skills — Transforming Futures, to increase the number of learners who study foundation degrees by 25%.

At present, over 11,000 students take higher education courses in further education colleges on either a full-time or part-time basis. That represents 20% of the total number of higher education enrolments. The total number of funded full-time higher education places in colleges is 3,833. That figure represents a 15% increase since 2002. In December, I announced an additional 70 full-time higher education places for further education, the first tranche of which will be allocated in 2012-13. There are also around 7,000 part-time higher education enrolments in further education.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree and accept that the financial challenges that people are facing today mean that more and more students, including mature students, would like the opportunity to undertake degree courses in their local towns for as long as possible before completing those courses at university? Does he agree that the further education colleges are well placed to deliver higher education provision when flexibility is required?

Mr Speaker: Before the Minister answers, Members have been elected since May 2011 and should know that supplementary questions

should not be read out. That would not happen in any other place.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will close my file over just in case. *[Laughter.]*

I agree with the thrust of Mr McMullan's point, and I am keen to make it clear that further education provides an alternative route to higher education. In some cases, the options provided by further education may be more applicable to the needs of industry. It also allows people to sample higher education through a foundation degree and then decide whether they want to go on to a further level.

When I make the point about the need to upskill the workforce in Northern Ireland and to have a uniformly higher level of skills, I do not always mean that that has to be done through a higher education degree from a university. Foundation degrees and, potentially, level four apprenticeships — we hope to address those later this year — are also worthy options for people to consider. All are equally valid in the upskilling of the workforce.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister agree that the recent success of the South West College in receiving three awards at the Association of Colleges Beacon Awards is a good foundation for FE colleges in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that other colleges could learn from that?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCrea for his question. I visited the South West College's STEM centre in Dungannon last Wednesday, and I was pleased to acknowledge those awards. It is important to put the Beacon Awards in context. They are UK-wide awards that reflect the best in further education across these islands. The offerings in Dungannon should be an example to us all of how Northern Ireland is not simply following other parts of the UK but is right in the lead.

Mr Beggs: Rather than continuing to commit further funds to higher education courses at FE colleges, does the Minister accept that it is important to have accessible basic educational and vocational courses in the regional colleges? Can he give an update on the financial concerns that have arisen following the Northern Regional College's decision to review the future of the Larne campus?

Dr Farry: Again, there is a lot in those questions. We are working on the Larne issue

and creating some temporary provision in that campus.

I want to stress the importance of FE across a broad spectrum, and it is not a case of picking or choosing one aspect over another. What happens in FE is relevant to business across a broad spectrum, and it is important that we continue to invest across that broad front. Overall, the FE budget has not been impacted as heavily as other parts of my Department's budget during the current CSR period, which is a reflection of its importance. We should invest further in that sector, and I welcome it continuing to flourish.

Mr McDevitt: Given the need to continue to develop better co-operation and greater integration between the work of the FE and university sectors, does the Minister agree that, whatever happens to his Department, the accountability for FE colleges and universities should be kept together and not split between two Departments?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McDevitt for his question. This theme is becoming infectious, although I understand Members' concern that we have the right way forward. The accountability mechanisms for further education and higher education are separate. They are different types of bodies with different governance arrangements and different accounting processes.

The issue of the accountability strands is less significant for the future direction of travel than the interface with business, which is absolutely fundamental to the future development of our economy.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Unemployment

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the latest published unemployment figures.

(AQO 1402/11-15)

Mr Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Although our rate of unemployment may be low compared with other European Union countries, there is still much

work to be done to boost economic growth to the levels that can tackle unemployment here in Northern Ireland. I and my Executive colleagues are determined to steer our economy through challenging conditions. Using, for example, the Boosting Business initiative, the jobs fund and the Executive's economic strategy, we aim to rebuild and rebalance the economy. We also aim to improve employment prospects by making our economy stronger and more competitive.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she have any proposals to tackle youth unemployment in particular? I should also mention that Strabane, in West Tyrone, has traditionally been very severely handicapped by unemployment.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Youth unemployment rates, as he will know, have risen across Europe and in all regions of the United Kingdom during the recession. Research has shown that youth unemployment here and across Europe is more sensitive to economic shocks. Statistics show that 8.1% of those aged under 25 in Northern Ireland are claiming unemployment benefits. As the Member will be aware, we have launched the Northern Ireland jobs fund, and some of the jobs that have been created by the jobs fund will help to deal with some of the youth unemployment.

Furthermore, the Minister for Employment and Learning has raised the specific issue of youth unemployment with Executive colleagues. He is currently working on proposals to put to the Executive in March to mitigate the higher rate of youth unemployment in Northern Ireland. We will keep that constantly under review. The Member will not be surprised to hear me say that that is a matter not just for my Department. It is a matter that we discuss regularly at the Executive, and, as I said, the Minister for Employment and Learning hopes to bring a paper that the Executive can approve in March.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister outline her hopes and the prospects for the future in relation to youth unemployment, given the difficulties that the economy currently presents to young people? She will be in my constituency later in the week, and, hopefully, she will be able to refer to some of the issues that will lead to a downward spiral in the youth unemployment figure.

Mrs Foster: The important thing to remember is that, although the media reports on youth

unemployment may lead us to believe that we have the highest rate in Europe, we are far from that. Keeping young people active in the labour market and providing meaningful employment opportunities is hugely important for us, because it allows us to realise our economic potential, look after the well-being of young people and, importantly, because it is sometimes forgotten, promote social cohesion. I look forward very much to visiting the Member's constituency later this week so that we can talk about the number of ongoing youth employment projects and those across the piece that are being promoted by Boosting Business. The jobs fund has a significant number of projects in the pipeline, about which I hope to make announcements in the near future.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis a Aire. I thank the Minister for her answers. Mindful of the news over the weekend about pressure being put on a number of jobs in Fujitsu in Derry, what steps is the Minister taking to tackle the high rates of unemployment in Derry and Strabane?

Mrs Foster: I will take up the Member's point about Fujitsu. I understand that, as part of the normal course of business, the company undertakes regular reviews to ensure that resources match its service delivery contractual commitments. A review carried out by the company's applications support group has identified a possible — and it is only a possible — surplus of around 60 staff across all its locations, and the company has entered into a 30-day statutory consultation period with all applications support staff across all its locations in the UK and Ireland, as required by law.

Therefore, the site in Londonderry may not be affected at all, but we shall have to wait. Fujitsu works closely with the Executive, Invest Northern Ireland and local representatives, and we hope that the quality and value of work that is delivered for Fujitsu in Londonderry will bear through in those job announcements.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister assure the House that her Department will take into consideration the latest unemployment figures when drawing up her final economic strategy? The draft strategy, which closed for responses last week, included a target of only promoting 25,000 jobs during the four-year period up to 2014-15.

Mrs Foster: The unemployment statistics form very much part of that economic strategy. The Member is right to point out that the consultation has now closed, and we will bring the final economic strategy to the Executive. I recall that, at the time of the launch of the draft economic strategy, there was some scepticism in and around the House about whether we could reach the target of 25,000 jobs. I said that we have to meet that target, and, indeed, I want to exceed it. As jobs are lost at one end, it is imperative that we continue to bring jobs into Northern Ireland and create jobs with local indigenous companies here. Our eyes are firmly set upon that.

Invest NI: Business Loans Scheme

2. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the progress of Invest NI's business loans scheme. (AQO 1403/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland continues to work to introduce two new loan schemes that are designed to help to fill identified funding gaps for our local business base. Those are the growth loan fund and the small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMME) loan fund. The contract for fund management services for the growth loan fund was awarded on Friday 17 February 2012, and, subject to the successful completion of contract negotiations and security clearance, it is anticipated that the growth loan fund will be operational by the end of March 2012. The Invest Northern Ireland board has also approved the development of a £5 million SMME loan fund. The fund will be managed on a commercial basis by an FSA-approved fund manager, who will be appointed following an open procurement process. A tender for that contract is currently being prepared, and it is anticipated that the fund will be operational by July 2012.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her response. What will be the range of the scale of loans for individual applicants to the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) growth loan fund, and what level of anticipated benefits does she see for the economy?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Those loan funds have been developed by Invest Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Department to fill a gap that has been identified by a lot of our

businesses in relation to the difficulties that they are experiencing in accessing finance. It is a familiar theme in the House that the biggest problem for our businesses in sustaining themselves and in wanting to grow is in relation to access to finance and the fact that the banks are not lending and are being quite difficult with some of our very good small and medium-sized enterprises. The growth loan fund will provide £50 million, primarily as unsecured loans, to viable growth businesses. It will be for businesses that are in growth mode in the manufacturing and tradable services sectors over the next five years. Typically, the loans will range between £50,000 and £500,000, and they will be negotiated on a fully commercial basis.

I came across that when I visited a firm with Mr Dunne and Mr Weir in north Down some time ago. It was a company that wanted to expand and had identified premises. It went to the bank, which said that it could lend money as long as the company brought a 40% deposit. That meant that the company could not expand, and the growth loan fund is there to help the sorts of businesses that want to and have the wherewithal to expand but are being prevented from doing so by banks that are not looking at the wider picture.

Mrs Dobson: Can the Minister outline the criteria for application to the £50 million loan fund that is contained in the draft Programme for Government (PFG), given that it will support a limited number of SMEs, 150 in total, between now and 2015?

Mrs Foster: Each of those loans will be negotiated individually, and that is why we had to appoint a fund manager to look at each individual application. That person will then set the interest rates for each of those applications. The growth loan fund is there for the range of £50,000 to £500,000, but we felt that there was a need to go lower than that with the SMME loan fund — we should really find a snappier way of saying that. The SMME loan fund will provide a further £5 million of unsecured loans for start-up businesses and small micro-businesses, and those loans will range typically from £1,000 to £50,000. So, that is a smaller amount of money. However, in my experience at constituency level, we need to get down to that level to help our small and micro-sized businesses.

Dr McDonnell: I appreciate the Minister's comments on the difficulty with the banks. Will

she give us an assessment or update on any discussions that she or her Department may have had on the number and proportion of cases where local banks have been the main creditor and have pushed local small companies into difficulties, ending up with administration or, indeed, individual voluntary agreements to try to stay alive? In other words, what proportion of businesses have been put into difficulties by banks, as distinct from those that have gone into difficulties through natural process?

Mrs Foster: It is difficult to take out those figures. However, I am sure that, when many Members around this House have looked at their constituency appointments over the past six months, they will have noticed that the amount of small businesses that have been coming to talk to us about access to finance has really grown over that time.

Bank lending is led by my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I know that he has had many meetings with banks. However, he made a comment last week which was very important: it is not just the banks that are putting pressure on companies. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is also putting a lot of pressure on companies. Indeed, I had a conversation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel to see if there is something that we in the Government can do to help some of those companies that are put under tremendous pressure by HMRC. They have been told that, if they do not pay within a certain time, very viable companies will be closed down. We will continue to explore that with the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Hydraulic Fracturing: North Coast

3. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that hydraulic fracturing could have on tourism in the north coast if it were to be permitted. (AQO 1404/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Petroleum licences have been issued to two companies near the north coast, namely Rathlin Energy and P R Singleton Ltd, neither of which has expressed any intention to carry out hydraulic fracturing. Exploration in that area is focused on conventional hydrocarbon targets, which can be developed without fracking should oil or gas be found. If exploration reveals a zone of shale prospective for gas that results in a proposal for hydraulic fracturing, that will

be subject to the full rigour of the planning and environmental impact assessment processes, within which the tourism implications will be fully addressed through comprehensive consultation.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister agree that, given the public information that is freely available out there, there is a danger to tourism because of fracking? Will she assure me that the major tourism stakeholders will be consulted before any input into the decision process on fracking? Also, will she agree that the other form of alternative energy is geothermal, especially around the Ballycastle area, and that her Department has, to date, shamelessly let that go?

Mrs Foster: I have already indicated that there are no plans in place for hydraulic fracturing in the north Antrim area. Neither Rathlin Energy nor P R Singleton has indicated that it intends to use hydraulic fracturing.

I was in Qatar last week, which provides 80% of gas to the United Kingdom; that is the same state that is hosting the 2022 World Cup. It does not seem to have done any damage to its tourism infrastructure. Indeed, it is bidding for the 2020 Olympics.

3.15 pm

Gas production can bring huge benefits to a particular part of the world. Therefore my answer to the first of the Member's many questions about whether fracturing damages tourism is: not if it is carried out in a way that will comply with planning permissions and environmental impact assessments. I do not see a direct link between tourism and hydraulic fracturing. In certain parts of our country disgraceful stories have been put out, instead of looking at the facts. We are at a stage where a planning application and an environmental impact assessment need to be put in place. People would do well to wait until those are in place before hyping up and getting excited.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for reminding us all about the position on hydraulic fracturing and the exploration of gas. Will the Minister explain to the House what it will mean to Northern Ireland if there is gas to be explored and whether it will be viable to do so?

Mrs Foster: The work that has been taken on by the particular company — a company that has met both the Minister of the Environment

and me — is to see whether it is feasible to take shale gas out of the Lough Allen basin and in and around Fermanagh. That work is ongoing. The company will carry out more work and then make a planning application and a strategic environmental impact assessment to see whether it can take shale gas out of County Fermanagh in a safe way that respects the environment and respects what happens in County Fermanagh.

I find it offensive for people to say that I would in some way damage County Fermanagh. As if. If anything like that happens in County Fermanagh, it will be done in a way that is environmentally friendly and which will bring much needed jobs to the county. That is where my eye is firmly fixed. It is just a pity that other representatives from the county do not have their eyes fixed firmly on that opportunity.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister confirm whether 70% of the land mass of Northern Ireland is currently under licence for exploration?

Mrs Foster: No.

Ms Lo: I want to come back to the Minister's response. She disputed the link between fracking and tourism. Minister, do you agree that we have a beautiful countryside with a rich natural habitat for wildlife, which is a main attraction for tourists?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I do —

Ms Lo: Sorry, Minister, and that fracking could disrupt our natural environment?

Mrs Foster: Yes to the first question; and, in response to the second, that is why we have processes in place — processes that are not replicated in America. I have been sent many examples of what has happened in various states across America, but, frankly, we have very stringent regulations here in Northern Ireland, and I would not have it any other way.

Creative Industries

4. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to support creative industries. (AQO 1405/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI prioritises those subsectors in the creative industries that offer the greatest potential for growth through driving a shift to higher value-added and productivity levels, namely, software, film and television,

digital content and music. Over the past three years, total Invest NI direct and indirect support to those subsectors of the creative industries was approximately £58 million.

Invest NI also assists the creative industries sector through its support for sectorally focused external delivery organisations. For example, Invest NI's support to Northern Ireland Screen has resulted in a number of substantial economic benefits for Northern Ireland, including the attraction of over 50 internationally mobile film and television investment projects, such as 'Game of Thrones', 'Your Highness' and 'City of Ember'. More recently, 'The Shore', a short film by Northern Ireland screenwriter, producer and director Terry George, was successful in winning the Oscar for best live action short film at last night's ceremony in Los Angeles. We heartily congratulate Terry George and all his team.

Invest NI is the largest single funder of Northern Ireland Screen, providing support of £35.5 million in the period 1 April 2003 to 31 March 2012. Invest NI has also provided support towards the activities of other sectoral bodies that seek to develop the creative industries, including Digital Circle, which works across the digital media sector, and Craft NI, which supports the development of the craft sector.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the importance of the creative industries and the recent success at the Oscars of Terry George and 'The Shore', will the Minister explain why there was no mention of the screen industries or Northern Ireland Screen in the draft economic strategy?

Mrs Foster: I think the Member will find it in the Programme for Government. I hope he is not suggesting that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) are not fully behind the absolutely marvellous economic benefit that we have derived from programmes such as 'Your Highness' and 'Game of Thrones'. Not a Question Time goes by when the First Minister or deputy First Minister do not make reference to the film industry in Northern Ireland, and I have been with them on many occasions when they have made reference to the marvellous investment that has been made in these industries.

I think it is wrong to suggest in any way that we do not value the creative industries. I spend a considerable amount of time — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to answer.

Mrs Foster: There is a lot of noise coming from certain sections of this Assembly today.

DETI is currently developing a collaborative framework with DCAL in relation to the creative industries, and that framework will set out clear roles and responsibilities for the key organisations. I accept that this may have been fragmented in the past, but we are changing that. A framework is under way, and we look forward to bringing that before the House.

Mr Speaker: Members need to rise in their place.

Miss McIlveen: As the Minister mentioned, Northern Ireland experienced success at last night's Oscars with Terry George's 'The Shore', however, when trying to attract television drama productions, it is recognised that Northern Ireland is at a competitive disadvantage, particularly with regard to tax incentives. What are the Minister and her Department doing to try to address that?

Mrs Foster: The Member makes a very good point. Invest NI is working with Northern Ireland Screen and other stakeholders across the United Kingdom to try to secure television tax credit similar to that currently in place for film production. In trying to attract high-value television drama productions, we, like the rest of the United Kingdom, are at a competitive disadvantage to other regions such as the Republic of Ireland, which has utilised tax incentives to secure a number of key television series such as 'The Tudors' and 'Camelot'. It is important that we push on in relation to the tax incentive issue, but the matter is not just one for Northern Ireland, it should be addressed right across the United Kingdom.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister provide an update on discussions that her Department has had in relation to the location of a digital hub in the Belfast area?

Mrs Foster: Those discussions are continuing. I had some very good discussions in relation to Digital Circle when I was in Londonderry recently. The work that is going on there is leading the way, and I look forward to having similar discussions in Belfast, which I have not had to date, to be honest with the Member.

However, Londonderry has made tremendous strides in relation to the digital work that is going on there, particularly in digital media. It should lead the way, particularly as the United Kingdom City of Culture title will be coming there in 2013.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs): South Antrim

5. **Ms Lewis** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how Invest NI has been helping small and medium-sized enterprises in South Antrim since May 2011. (AQO 1406/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland continues to work closely with small and medium-sized companies across South Antrim and has supported the development plans of several locally owned businesses including Texthelp, Team Solutions and Pneutrol Ireland since May 2011.

Over the past nine months, we implemented a range of initiatives, such as Boosting Business and the £19 million jobs fund, to help businesses to cope with the impact of the downturn and to create new employment opportunities. In south Antrim, six jobs fund projects are under negotiation, with the potential to create almost 50 new jobs. In addition, the jobs fund has offered support for five young people to set up their own business and has supported a number of social enterprises across the constituency to create a further 25 new jobs.

Ms Lewis: I thank the Minister for her answer, which is very much welcome. The Minister is obviously aware that, in many cases, high street traders, especially in small and medium-sized communities such as the one that I represent, are struggling with the economic climate. Can the Minister inform me how her Department has been assisting those businesses, and what mechanisms of support are open to them?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. The Member mentioned the high street in particular. Although Invest Northern Ireland does not engage directly with the retail sector, we acknowledge the retail sector's importance to the local economy. A retail initiative, which was developed by Invest Northern Ireland, has run successfully in two council areas — Larne and Ballymena. It has been delivered in partnership with the Chamber

of Commerce, the traders' forum, the University of Ulster, the sector skills councils and Business in the Community. It has been a success, and we are looking at whether we can run something like that in the rest of the south Antrim area.

Again, it points to the importance of working with local partners, particularly for microbusinesses, because, often those very small businesses look first to local government for assistance, and the local economic development projects that have come up from many of our local councils are based on helping small businesses. The Fermanagh example of Survive and Thrive is a very good programme, and I have seen many of those programmes right across Northern Ireland. So, it is about working in partnership with our local delivery agents and with the Chamber of Commerce across Northern Ireland and trying to deliver very specialised local solutions for what are, in many cases, very localised problems.

Mr Kinahan: Has the Minister had discussions with the Environment Minister about giving councils, such as Antrim Borough Council, more power in the future through the review of public administration (RPA) to help small and medium-sized businesses?

Mrs Foster: Part of the RPA proposals include part of my Department being devolved to local councils to deal with local economic development. However, I will say to the Member again that it is about partnership working between local councils and Departments here at Stormont. It is not about who has the power; it is about who has the willingness to look for a solution to the problems in their particular area. I have seen that working very well in a number of councils, whether it is Ballymena or Craigavon, which I have been to on a number of occasions. There is a real willingness there to look for a local solution. That is done through the LED programme, which is administered by DETI, and I call on all Members to look for local solutions in their local areas, to put in an application through their local councils for LED money, and let us get that money out and spent in the areas where it is needed.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister spoke on a number of occasions about the difficulties that SMEs face in trying to get at some of the moneys involved. Is she aware that that is similar to the problems that they have in trying to drawdown moneys from the European

framework programme 7? She also spoke about microfinance. Has she had any discussions with OFMDFM about that difficulty and how to get over it?

Mrs Foster: With regard to the moneys that are available through FP7 and the successor to FP7, part of the difficulty has been that SMEs do not have the capacity to access that money, and my colleague the junior Minister knows very well that it is something that exercises us a great deal. When Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was over with us last year, we very much impressed upon her the need for SMEs to be able to access European moneys in a more meaningful way. I also mentioned that to MEPs to see whether they can assist us in any way.

Go For It Programme

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the current Go For It programme run by Invest NI.

(AQO 1407/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Go For It brand encompasses a number of enterprise awareness, business start-up and business growth initiatives undertaken by Invest Northern Ireland.

As such, Go For It includes activities around youth, social enterprise, female entrepreneurship and neighbourhood renewal. It also included the delivery of the former enterprise development programme focused on business start and growth of local businesses.

3.30 pm

The House will be aware that as a direct result of the legal action undertaken by Enterprise Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland is not in a position to deliver a business start programme. That means that an important part of the overall Go For It service cannot be provided in the manner we all want to see on the ground and in local communities.

Invest NI is providing an interim service that is focused on responding to enquiries and signposting to other sources of support, but that cannot be compared to a fully functional programme. Invest NI is able to continue to promote that idea of entrepreneurship through its Go For It brand, and that is particularly important in those specific areas I have mentioned, such as youth, neighbourhood renewal and social enterprise.

My assessment is that that work is valuable and, indeed, essential to the stimulation of public interest in enterprise, entrepreneurship and business start, and as an important contributor in providing routes to self-employment for those groups that tend to be under-represented in the business community.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends Question Time.

Private Members' Business

Decade of Centenaries

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the number of centenaries of significant historic events affecting the UK and Ireland in the next 10 years; calls on the Executive to ensure that these are marked in an inclusive manner; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work together, with the British and Irish Governments, to develop a co-ordinated approach to the commemoration of these important events in our shared history. — [Mr Lyttle.]

Mr Swann: The first part of the motion states:

"That this Assembly notes the number of centenaries of significant historic events affecting the UK and Ireland in the next 10 years".

So far, the debate has dealt with an holistic, aspirational approach of how we will move forward as an inclusive society in an inclusive Northern Ireland and how we will all respect each other's terms, histories and traditions. As the culture spokesman for the Ulster Unionist Party, I want to focus on some of those events that are of fundamental importance to unionism and those events that set us apart but can make us equal as well. They can do that, so long as we can accept the shared history, encourage an understanding and accept why they are important to us and this side of the House.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

I will take the time to remind the House and the public who are listening of a few of those events that are present and important to us in our history and will go down as our events through this decade of centenaries.

April 1912 was an important time for unionism. The first commemoration will be that of the Balmoral review, where 250 Orangemen converged on the Balmoral showground declaring that under no circumstances would they accept home rule. One of the other main events of 1912 — one that has been highlighted many times in the House — was the signing of the Ulster Covenant on 28 September 1912 in opposition to home rule for Ireland. That iconic document was signed by 237,368 men. Some 234,000 women signed a parallel declaration.

The Ulster Unionist Sir Edward Carson was the first person to sign the covenant at the Belfast City Hall. He was followed by Lord Londonderry, representatives of all the Protestant Churches and Sir James Craig. The signatories, 471,000 in all, were against the establishment of a home rule Parliament in Dublin. A British covenant, similar to the Ulster Covenant in opposition to the Home Rule Bill, received two million signatures in 1914. The covenant is now digitised and can be accessed through the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). I encourage all Members to search for their ancestors to see if they signed the Ulster Covenant back then.

The covenant is a fundamental part of the history of Northern Ireland and is part of the architecture of the Ulster Unionist Party. As an Ulster Unionist, I am proud of the contribution my party made in those significant times. So significant were they, that they are commemorated in the Rudyard Kipling poem, 'Ulster 1912'.

So great was the threat of home rule in 1912 that the Ulster volunteers were founded as a militia to block home rule for Ireland. Latterly, in 1913, they were organised into the Ulster Volunteer Force, with many of its members enlisting with the 36th (Ulster) Division at the outbreak of World War I. The 36th (Ulster) Division has gone down in history for its valiant efforts in the battle of the Somme, which must also be commemorated as a centenary in 1916.

What must also be commemorated is how the same sacrifice was paid by members of the 10th and 16th Irish Divisions. After the battle of the Somme, Captain Wilfred Spender of the Ulster Division's HQ staff was quoted in the press as saying:

"I am not an Ulsterman, but yesterday, the 1st July, as I followed their amazing attack, I felt that I would rather be an Ulsterman than anything else in the world."

That is how we should commemorate and go forward into this decade of centenaries — as Ulstermen.

The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 2018 will represent the centenary of the end of the war to end all wars, a day when remembrance of all who fought and died in that war, and since, will be to the fore. They, like others, must be remembered.

The Representation of the People Act 1912 gave the vote to women over 30 years and, in 1928, that age qualification was lowered to 21 years. That will be covered later by my party colleague Sandra Overend.

As Members who spoke previously have highlighted, there is a need for a joined-up approach. It is, of course, important that all commemorations are marked in an inclusive manner and that there are no attempts to rewrite what happened 100 years ago as a justification for nearly 40 years of terrorism. The Ulster Unionist Party played the leading role in many of those events 100 years ago, and it will play an integral role in their commemoration.

It is important that we remember the events in our history, but it is also important that, in remembering them, we do not relive them.

Mr McDevitt: History can haunt or liberate. It can, as we well know, educate but, tragically, also divide. The coming decade can, in the opinion of my party, lay the foundations for a new Ireland, or it can entrench the prejudice and ignorance that has grown up over the past century.

The time has surely come to move on, and things are often not as simple or straightforward as they seem. Edward Carson, the first signatory of the covenant was a fellow Dubliner, a hurler and a man as opposed to the partition of Ireland as any you could possibly meet. James Connolly was a Scot; he had served seven years in the British Army with distinction, and yet he was executed for his republicanism and socialism by the very Crown he served. In 2002, Connolly was voted by Britons the sixty-fourth most influential person in British history. Last year, he came third, behind only John Hume and one other, in a poll of the most influential Irish people.

Connolly has a special place in my heart because it was to my great-grandfather's house that he came, at the turn of the 20th century, to organise trade unions in Belfast. He lodged with my great-grandfather for about six months. When he came to Belfast — or so, at least, family history will tell you — he did not come as a particularly ardent Irish republican. He came simply as someone who believed that the right of working men and women was a right that must and should be upheld, irrespective of their sense of identity. In fact, he tells us something about history that we could well reflect on in the next decade. He is recorded by Diarmaid Ferriter

in his book 'The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000' as saying:

"history, in general, treats the working class as the manipulator of politics treats the working man — that is to say, with contempt when he remains passive and with derision, hatred and misrepresentation when he dares evince a desire to throw off the yoke of political or social servitude. Ireland is no exception to this rule. Irish history has ever been written by the master class — in the interests of the master class."

Those are important words to reflect on as we set off on this decade. A century on, we must make sure that there is no writing of history by any master class — be it a new one or an old one — and that we seek understanding, depth and reconciliation in our history.

Last year, another person in another place said:

"This was the decade of the covenant and the gun, of blood sacrifice and bloody politics, a time of division and war, not only on this island but across the world. It was the decade that defined relationships on these islands for most of the last century."

That individual said that he went on to

"recall with immense pride that it was a period that saw the achievement of Irish independence and the foundation"

of the modern Irish state, but also with great sadness that it saw the partition of Ireland and its people and two parts of Ireland losing touch with each other and their shared heritage. He said that for most of the last century, we looked across the border, and we saw; what we saw, we were afraid and wary of.

He continues:

"We forced each other into making choices, into defining ourselves in exclusive terms. We failed to recognise that, even though we have different traditions and perspectives, what we share is much more important than what separates us."

Mr Byrne: The home rule period lasted from 1868 to 1910, with the third Home Rule Bill being enacted in 1912. Does the Member agree that, throughout that time, the home rule movement was a major democratic political movement that had legitimacy and that legislation was duly passed in the House of Commons? Is that an issue that also should be reflected in the commemorations?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Mr Byrne for the intervention and will return to his point in my closing remarks.

The gentleman I was quoting went on to say:

"We collectively failed to capture the complexity of identities on the island. For too long, we concentrated on our differences. For too long, those differences were magnified. And for too long, the similarities and commonality of our interests were forgotten or ignored. We created separate histories — British and Irish, orange and green, republican, nationalist, unionist, loyalist — deep wells from which we thought we could draw succour."

Of course, that was only the then Taoiseach, Brian Cowen. He makes some very important points. He makes the point that history must never be used to entrench division. In the coming decade, this generation has the greatest duty ever to be placed on a generation of Irish democrats, be they British-Irish, Irish-Irish, Northern Irish, Ulster Unionist or whatever, and it is the duty to ensure that history becomes a foundation stone and not a yoke.

Coming back to Mr Byrne's point, it is worth noting that all the leaders of the rebellion were home rulers in the years before it. One of them, who died in the trenches, was Tom Kettle. His only counsel to Ireland at the time of third Home Rule Bill was this:

"to become more deeply Irish, she must become European."

Mr Irwin: We have reached a point in our society where, in the next few years, important points in history will be remembered in the context of centenaries. Some of those events will be remembered with more appreciation than others and by varied audiences with varying levels of interest. Indeed, there will be those in society who will take little interest in any of the centenaries. However, the fact remains that important points in our history will be reaching their 100-year milestone and people will be marking those occasions in many ways. The media has been trying to talk up the possibility of contention surrounding the various centenaries, and there has been considerable interest in this motion from many quarters.

We must not forget, however, that we in Northern Ireland have been celebrating much

older events on a yearly basis for centuries. There is no greater event or spectacle than the Orange Order's Twelfth of July celebrations. Indeed, I can recall the magnificent tricentennial events organised by the Orange Order in Northern Ireland to commemorate the 300-year anniversary of the Williamite victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Those events were enjoyed by thousands of people. The annual celebrations grow in popularity year on year, with tourists coming to Northern Ireland from far and wide, some from as far as Canada, on a yearly basis to view the parades.

Given the undeniably positive progress that has been made in Northern Ireland in recent times, and the reality that Northern Ireland is made up culturally of many different strands and opinions, there is a definite requirement for everyone, from a public perspective and a public representative perspective, to view upcoming centenaries with a sense of tolerance.

As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and as someone from a Christian, Protestant and unionist background, I am looking forward to marking a number of the centenaries, such as the great sacrifice laid down at the Somme by our grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Those men were from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds — something that is slowly becoming more recognised — and fought and died side by side for the freedoms we enjoy today.

There are other events that will not resonate so well with me, but I cannot deny that they occurred or that other people hold them close to their hearts as part of their identity or culture. In essence, the debate seeks to promote a tolerance that we can use as a basis on which to move forward on centenary issues. That will, I think, be the view of most in our society.

3.45 pm

Recent concerns noted that paramilitary groups and factions may use centenary events to further their own ends. That must be rejected and condemned as unwanted and unacceptable. Communities must show their objection to any such hijacking attempts from whatever quarter.

Although celebrating a milestone can be positive and uplifting, it should be remembered that the key word for many of the centenary events should be "commemorate". There is a distinct difference between celebrating and

commemorating. The greatest respect is shown if, in circumstances where, for instance, great loss of life has been a reality of an occasion such as the Somme, every effort is made to commemorative and respectfully remember those who paid for our freedom with their lives.

I feel that there will much more debate and discussion on this issue as time progresses. However, it is important that the House sets an example that the public can follow. I look forward to further discussions at Assembly and local council level in the weeks and months ahead. I support the motion.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The aim of any commemorations in the near future should be to promote reconciliation and not to deepen division. However, the fact is that many events that took place around 100 years ago have different narratives and each is legitimate.

I listened with interest to the news on the radio this morning. Some of the events were mentioned: the formation of the UVF, the signing of the covenant, the Easter Rising, and so on. The presenter went on to say that perhaps the commemoration of 'Titanic' was as apolitical as you can get. In many ways, it is. We had the biggest ocean-going liner of its time, built on this island, in this city, just down the road. Not only is it connected to this city but it has a connection with Cobh in County Cork, in that it called in there on its maiden voyage. That was the last port it was in. We then had the tragedy of the sinking of 'Titanic' and the terrible loss of life on that fateful night.

Some people, particularly from a unionist perspective, have asked why nationalists on occasion are lukewarm about 'Titanic' and the commemoration. It is quite simple: because there is a different narrative, not about 'Titanic' itself but with regard to the shipyard and the discrimination that took place in the shipyard. I am not trying to strike a discordant note. I use that example simply to illustrate the different narratives that exist about the same events, and each narrative has its own legitimacy.

Those events should be located in their wider political context. We all know that, back at the start of the last century, many of those events created reactions that led to an acceleration of the conflict at that time. What we certainly do not want to do with these forthcoming commemorations is to build up tension again

to create conflict. It is important, therefore, that if there is any civic or grant aid to be handed out to any commemoration committees there should be a pre-requisite that the events will be inclusive and non-triumphalist and will not be coat-trailing exercises. Councils, the Assembly and the Oireachtas should ensure that any planning groups are made up of all parties.

It is important that everyone be allowed to participate in events as long as they are comfortable with that; no undue pressure should be placed on people to participate in events with which they are uncomfortable. The Queen's visit to Dublin was mentioned today, a visit with which Sinn Féin was uncomfortable. We are uncomfortable participating in other annual events and have challenges with all those issues.

Interestingly, I was asked whether the Queen's visit posed challenges for republicans. My answer was that I thought that the visit posed more challenges for unionists, because the Queen was commemorating people who gave their lives fighting against Crown forces in Ireland. That presents a challenge for unionists. Republicans also have challenges, and I am sure that, as a party, Sinn Féin will meet a lot of those challenges and be happy to participate in events with which we would not normally be associated.

I welcome Nelson McCausland's words over the weekend. He said that he would be prepared to participate in, for example —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Sheehan: — a debate about the 1916 Rising. We should remember that anything we do should add value to the peace process.

Mr Humphrey: The decade of centenaries presents a great opportunity to demonstrate our growing maturity as a society in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it will provide a real test if some people in this community are incapable of moving on. The centenaries mark a number of significant dates that shaped the history of what has become Northern Ireland and our neighbouring state, the Republic. If we are serious about building a society that is at peace with itself, all of us across the Chamber and across our community — we must stress at all times that we have one community in Northern

Ireland — must step up to the plate and give leadership.

As someone who is Presbyterian, unionist, from an Ulster-Scots background and proud to be an Orangeman, I am confident of what I am. I believe in civil and religious liberty for all and welcome and appreciate diversity in our community. Diversity has often been seen as a weakness or a threat in Northern Ireland, but I believe that it is a strength. We should exploit our diversity as a positive. More than 50% of tourists across the world are cultural tourists, and, in my view, nowhere is there such a cocktail of diversity as in Northern Ireland.

Respect, tolerance and understanding are the cornerstones on which we must build our new, united Northern Ireland and deal with our national and international difficulties of perception and reputational problems. It is important that events marking our history are commemorated accurately and constructively and, as far as possible, inclusively. For too long in Northern Ireland, those who fostered division, exploited traditional difference and demonised have set a negative agenda. That must stop. The attitude and strategy around traditional Orange parades is an obvious example. Last week in the Chamber, I put a question to the deputy First Minister. In response, he said that he absolutely agreed with me that the cohesion, sharing and integration document should reinforce the need for tolerance and celebrate cultural diversity and identity in Northern Ireland. I welcome that shift from Sinn Féin and the shift, and comments, about the Queen's visit to Northern Ireland later this year. I also welcome the Queen's leadership when she visited the Republic, a leadership that others were unable to meet.

Institutions of the state such as museums, schools, universities, libraries and PRONI should help to educate and to address ignorance, prejudice, propaganda and distrust. This year, we will commemorate the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant and the culmination of the home rule crisis. I call on the House to show maturity and recognise the fact that, for us as unionists, Ulster day is hugely important and that it should be made a public holiday in Northern Ireland to recognise the significance of 28 September for the unionist tradition.

The year 2013 is the centenary of the formation of the UVF and the IVF. The year 2016 will have significant celebrations for both communities. For my community, it will be the Somme and all that happened there. Indeed, as Mr Irwin said, there is a growing acceptance across this island and across our community that there is a huge contribution of Irishmen to be commemorated, North and South, unionist and nationalist, and of course the Easter Rising as well. The culmination of everything that flowed from that will be the celebration of Northern Ireland as a state within the Union.

It is time that we looked at the positives in Northern Ireland. As a place, Northern Ireland has come far: it is a much better place than it was years ago. The Titanic is an example. Out of that awful, negative, disastrous event positive things are now flowing. As we move forward together, with the constitutional question resolved, we owe it to our community — and as I said earlier, I make no apology for repeating that we are one community — to build for a positive future. We must build a society that is at peace with itself, where tolerance is the norm, where accepting division is a strength and where history cannot be rewritten.

Northern Ireland is a changed and changing place. We must secure our future based on understanding and difference. We must celebrate our different cultures, value them and keep Northern Ireland moving forward. As we endeavour to build a shared future and a shared space, this will be the acid test for the parties across the Chamber and for all sections of our community.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate today. I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it forward. Given the 10 years of centenaries on which Northern Ireland is about to embark, this is a timely debate.

My colleague Robin Swann dealt with the historical and cultural significance of the centenary events from a unionist perspective, and he outlined the fundamental role that my party has played in the foundation of the state and in the intervening years. Indeed, as he spoke, my mind was drawn to the various monuments inside and outside this Building, and I feel that we should use and promote all available artefacts to share the story of these past events, including the table on which the Ulster Covenant was signed.

I also want to mention briefly one event that falls within the decade of centenaries, and that is suffrage. Women throughout the UK campaigned considerably for the right to vote. It was finally granted in 1918 through the passing of legislation, namely the Representation of the People Act and the Eligibility of Women Act. The 100th anniversary of that should be marked to commemorate how far our society has come in that respect. Indeed, this is an excellent opportunity to promote the contribution that women can make to the political process and engage more women in politics in Northern Ireland today.

As economy spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I want to approach the debate largely from a tourism point of view. The motion mentions the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment specifically, and she has a vital role to play as we commemorate important centenaries such as the signing of the Ulster Covenant; the battle of the Somme, in which the 36th Ulster Division played such a crucial role; and the first Parliament here at Stormont.

We have a one-off chance to take advantage of these historic centenaries, encourage tourism and give the Northern Ireland economy a much-needed boost. Tourism targets set out in the last Programme for Government were not met, and we must learn from that. Tourism is a key driver of the economy. I recognise the good work that is being done in the industry, especially in relation to the five signature projects: the St Patrick and Christian Heritage project; the Mourne project; the Causeway Coast and Glens project; the Walled City of Londonderry project; and the Titanic project. However, I call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that adequate time, effort and planning are given to ensuring that we are making the most of the opportunity to increase tourism through the commemoration of the various centenaries outlined in the House today.

As the motion suggests, this is a cross-departmental issue. Today, I note that the Minister for Employment and Learning committed funding for WorldHost customer service training this year through the skills solution service, as well as developing a short training package with the Northern Regional College to assist the sector in upskilling staff on the north coast. That is the type of proactive approach that must be encouraged, and I ask the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

to outline the work ongoing in her Department to ensure that Northern Ireland capitalises economically on the decade of centenaries this year and in the coming years.

4.00 pm

In conclusion, I will mention the draft tourism strategy. That draft document dates back to February 2010, but it has not yet been published as a full strategy. It is still in draft form. Although that is concerning in itself, I ask the Minister for clarification on the strategy's status, as it offers an opportunity. It is supposed to provide a clear vision for the development of Northern Ireland's tourism experience through to 2020, but the Titanic is the only centenary event that it mentions. Given that Northern Ireland is so rich in cultural heritage, and given what we have heard today about the wide range of imminent centenaries, I challenge the Minister on why the draft document does not include any plans for such important events as the signing of the Ulster Covenant. The opportunity is there to remedy that particular failing of the draft document, so I urge the Minister to do so.

The decade of centenaries is vital to the Northern Ireland tourism industry. Commemorations must be inclusive if we are to attract visitors and subsequently boost tourism revenue. It is also an opportunity to show how far Northern Ireland has come and to signpost where we, as a society, want to get to in the future. For those reasons, I support the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to make a few comments about the decade of centenaries that is on us at the moment. This forthcoming decade of centenaries, and how and why events of various types are commemorated, will be a critical test of our political maturity and of the responsibility of each and every Member of the House and the Executive in particular. It is important that the decade of centenaries is discussed on the Floor of the Assembly. However, the SDLP believes that responsibility for the approach should not be left in the hands of a few Ministers and that it should most meaningfully be not just discussed on the Floor of the Assembly but placed at the heart of the Executive programme.

The approach must be inclusive and co-ordinated. The SDLP believes that it must be fundamentally underpinned by a set of agreed principles and protocols informing an ethical,

critical and factual remembrance. That is the approach that we will take wherever the issue of remembrance and commemorations arises, whether it is here or in councils across the country. Achieving agreement on overarching principles to guide the commemoration of a decade of political turbulence 100 years ago is no easy task. However, it is an essential task. We, as a community, cannot afford to ignore or pretend that it did not happen, nor can we afford to pursue a tit-for-tat approach that is set in a superficial framework of, "I will go to a banal event of yours if you come to a banal event of mine." Events and gestures must be of substance and meaning. Empty gestures will do nobody any good.

I have no doubt that we will not reach a consensus on the narrative involved, but we can and should secure agreement on some underpinning principles and protocols that will define a consistent, fair and inclusive approach to all the key events from 1912 right through to 1922 and beyond. Many of our academics and local communities have been debating the issue for some time and, to an extent, have led the way in establishing the principles and frameworks for ethical and shared remembering.

In the time that is afforded here today, it is not possible to go into greater depth. However, it is the SDLP's view that commemorative events must be based on a clear understanding of and generosity to not only the diversity but the interdependence of our history. Although we might see different narratives, there is a clear interdependence between all the events.

The events must be open to fresh interpretation based on the facts as they emerge. The sometimes silent alternative stories must also be heard, whether that is the alternative Ulster Protestant men and women's covenant signed in 1912 or the fact that some 26 children were killed as participants in the Easter Rising.

The SDLP believes that it is vital that we do not just remember the past but ask honest, critical questions about it and that articulating a vision for the future and looking forward is as much a part of the process as looking back. The decade of centenaries presents the Assembly and the Executive with a challenge and an important opportunity. By "the Assembly", I do not mean the body but each and every Member of the House. Some will look to hijack events, to

rewrite history and to set up a narrow version of their history. That cannot be allowed to happen.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I appreciate and agree entirely with all he said. Does the Member agree that, if Governments take the lead on this, they should appoint Committees and advisory groups that are representative and reflective of society in Northern Ireland? That is how we will get to the position he is talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr McDonnell: I am very happy to get to the stage where we are discussing the issue honestly and openly. I urge the Government to get to grips with it. I believe that there has been a certain shyness or reservedness. This is a difficult issue, and I am not taking away from that. A lot of people could be hurt if it is not dealt with sensitively and properly. However, I believe that honest engagement, be it in the Chamber or in other places, will help us through what could be a divisive period.

The forthcoming decade presents the Executive and, as I said, each and every Member with a challenge and an important opportunity not to allow events to be hijacked. As political leaders, we must be responsible and as ethical as we can be. That applies as much to the language that we use as it does to the moves we make or the things we do. We must encourage people to honestly engage in discussions around shared differences and the common and interconnecting themes of our history.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Dr McDonnell: We must use the opportunity to educate ourselves and each other at all levels, be it in our schools, our communities or in the House. We must commemorate not celebrate.

Mr Frew: I certainly welcome today's debate but maybe not some of its content. I thank Mr Lyttle for proposing the motion, the wording of which I commend and agree with. I am very passionate about the issue. It is important to us that all significant historic events affecting the UK and the Republic of Ireland are recorded, remembered, explored and certainly learned about.

Some events will be described by some as celebrations, while others will describe them as commemorations of the past. That is OK; it is

justifiable. However, the decade of centenaries also offers us an opportunity to record and teach people, particularly our young people, about the history, and when I say "the history", I mean "the history" not "our history" or "their history", which I heard said in the Chamber even today. We should not talk about "our history" or "their history". It is "the history" — the history of Northern Ireland and the people. To label events as "our history", "their history", "one section of history", "one section of our people's history" or "one section of history that ignores another part of history" does a great disservice to the people involved in those events. It is "the history" — the history of Northern Ireland and the people. That is the most important thing that can be said about that statement.

Glorifying or justifying acts of violence or terrorism cannot be allowed, and there can be no excuse for triumphalism. Not one person in the Chamber remembers or was there to witness the events that we talk about; I do not think so anyway. However, what is sure is that, when we come to teach our young people, we should do so based solely on facts and figures, and then on the context of the age in which those people lived and the ramifications for the UK and what became the Republic of Ireland.

If there is a challenge for anyone around learning and understanding our past or the past, that is the challenge for them.

There should be no rewriting of history. It really annoys me when I hear and see attempts to rewrite events of the past 40 years that we have all had experience of and that we can all remember very vividly. That should not be the case. We all know that the people who were involved in the events of 100 years ago would have had their own experiences, views, thought processes and political viewpoints. That is important and should be explored because it will add to the learning process for our young people. Children in our schools learn about historical events throughout the world. That is fine. I love Greek history and hearing about wars throughout the world and how they affected European, British and Irish history. I have absolutely no problem with that. However, more must be done to teach our young people about the history and people of Northern Ireland. We do not know how those events affected our ancestors. It is important that those events are not just memorised or commemorated and celebrated at a high level; they should be

remembered in our streets and homes, so that people know the difference that a certain event made to a street. We talk about the young men in the 36th Ulster Division; the population of young men from one street was wiped out, and that street should know about it. In that way, our young people will not only be able to learn about the past but will be able to touch it, and that is very important.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Frew: Our young people should be able to touch those commemorations. It is not something that the Assembly should just debate and forget about or celebrate and commemorate. Our young people should have a deep understanding of such events.

Mr Douglas: I also commend Chris Lyttle and his party for tabling the motion, which I support.

Pat Sheehan talked about some of the difficulties in the shipyard over the years. I would be the first to acknowledge that, at times of tension, not just in the shipyard or in east Belfast but across Northern Ireland, there were major problems. Last summer, as part of the West Belfast Festival, I spoke at the City Cemetery, where all my relatives are buried. In an initiative undertaken by Councillor Tom Hartley, a headstone was erected in memory of Samuel Scott, a young man of 15, who was the first person to die while working on the Titanic. It was interesting that loyalists and republicans were at the graveside. In fact, a lament was played on the flute by a member of the North Down Defenders Flute Band, I think. As part of my research, I found that, when the Titanic was being built in 1912, over 3,000 of the workers were Catholic. Today, we are looking at our history and talking about learning from it, which is exactly what Paul was saying. It is not just about educating our young people; it is about educating ourselves as well.

The timing of the debate is very important. It is encouraging that other institutions and organisations have debated how we deal with a decade of centenaries coming quickly down the track for us all. I pay tribute to Belfast City Council. Last week, it gave approval, on a cross-community basis, to back civic celebration plans for the Queen's diamond jubilee. Hopefully, we in the Chamber will learn from that civic leadership and work together and show respect to one another.

I believe that the positive mood music, as the late David Ervine used to call it, is the result of the inspired leadership that was shown by Her Majesty The Queen on her visit to the Republic of Ireland last year.

During her visit to Dublin Castle last May, Her Majesty said to President McAleese:

“speaking here in Dublin Castle it is impossible to ignore the weight of history, as it was yesterday when you and I laid wreaths at the Garden of Remembrance.

Indeed, so much of this visit reminds us of the complexity of our history, its many layers and traditions, but also the importance of forbearance and conciliation. Of being able to bow to the past, but not be bound by it.”

Those last words are key. President McAleese spoke of not being able to change the past but choosing to change the future. That has been one of the most positive aspects of a positive debate.

4.15 pm

I remind Members that the Ulster Covenant was signed by more than 3,000 people in my church, the Westbourne Presbyterian Church. Many people will know its inspired leader, the Rev Mervyn Gibson. The church will hold a series of talks to explain the Ulster Covenant. I have the leaflet here. The talks will cover an introduction to the Ulster Covenant and themes such as Presbyterianism and the covenant, nationalism and the covenant, and women and the covenant — in support of Sandra’s point of view. My church will host that series of events, which is open to all, at the bottom of the Newtownards Road. It is hoped that people, both those who take pride in the covenant and those from the tradition that opposes it, will be challenged and informed by the talks.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that educational seminars, lectures, museum exhibitions, plays and other cultural displays are a good way to commemorate potentially contentious events, such as the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Rising, and that we need to encourage artists and historians to become actively involved, because they can challenge old assumptions, rather than conform to them, and give new perspectives on the past?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Douglas: Thank you very much. The Member makes a very good point. In fact, on 16 March 2012, we will hold our sixth, I believe, St Patrick’s Day breakfast in east Belfast. We had hoped that the Rev Dr Paisley would be able to come along and speak. I hope to God that he is and that he is well and strong enough. That event has encompassed people from right across Belfast, not just east Belfast. St Patrick’s Day was also a contentious event in the past. There are still problems, such as those in Downpatrick recently. At least, as the Member says, we are trying to debate the matter and encourage people to be involved.

In conclusion, we have focused entirely on centenaries. As Pat Sheehan said, let us also remember the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic on 15 April 1912. One of the deadliest peacetime maritime disasters in history, it resulted in the deaths of 1,517 people. Lest we forget. I commend the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, to respond to the debate.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you explain why only those who support the motion have been called to speak in the debate? Surely it is a basic tenet of debate that the voice of dissent should also be heard. It is also a basic requirement of Standing Order 17(5) that due regard should be had to the balance of opinion on a matter. Can we have some explanation as to why only those who wish to support the motion have been given the opportunity to speak?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Deputy Speaker, I must have regard for Standing Order 17. I have looked at it carefully. A number of other Members indicated that they, too, wished to speak. I must have due regard for party strength and the number who indicate that they wish to speak as well as for opinion. Certainly, the Member has not approached me or indicated to me any particular point of view that he wishes to make known. In the past, I have endeavoured to listen carefully to everyone’s point of view and ensure that individuals such as him and, indeed, others have an opportunity. That is the judgement that I must make while I am in the Chair. On this occasion, I have judged to hear other Members. That is my decision.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I point out that, twice today, I gave notice of my intention to speak against the motion. I informed the Clerk to your right this morning, and I repeated that observation during the currency of the debate. Therefore, I am surprised that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are ignorant of that. Of course, I accept what you say, but, nonetheless, I am very surprised that that was not conveyed to you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I said that you did not indicate to me that you wished to speak in any particular way. I acknowledge that you passed a message to a Clerk. However, I do not think that it is a good way of doing business if a Member simply says that he or she wishes to speak against a motion and, on that basis, expects to be called on every motion that is on the Floor. I have taken a decision on this occasion.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): First, I commend the Members who proposed the motion for providing us with the opportunity to debate this very important subject. That importance is shown by the media attention that there has been on the motion today.

Representation on these Benches and the experiences and journeys that have brought us to this place highlight that our history is complex. I think that that has been reflected in the many contributions that we heard today. At times, that experience has been difficult and painful, but it is intertwined, shared and connected in many different ways. I listened very carefully to Members' many contributions this afternoon, and I was struck immediately by the fact that there were many different voices, yet none was discordant. There has very much been a feeling of moving Northern Ireland forward and wanting to recognise what happened in the past while recognising where we are today.

So, there is a clear acknowledgement from all parts of the House that the many events that shaped our history over the past 100 years and more are worthy of commemoration. However, they are worthy of commemoration in a manner that demonstrates maturity, balance, inclusivity and good, honest common sense. It is abundantly clear that many of the events that were mentioned during the debate can be joyous and uplifting celebrations. Of course, there must also be a place for the many commemorations of the tragic events of the past that need to

take place. If they are not managed sensibly and responsibly, all those events, whether they are celebrations or commemorations, can have the capacity to arouse passions, cause anger, provoke tension and exacerbate community division. We must avoid that at all costs.

In countless places and on countless occasions in recent months, I have said that 2012 offers an unparalleled opportunity for us to present to the world all that is best about Northern Ireland. I hope that I do not need to remind the House — I am pleased that Mr Douglas was one of the last Members to speak — that Titanic Belfast will open in a month's time and that that will be followed a little later in the year by the opening of the new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. We shall also relish hosting the Irish Open at Portrush for the first time in over 50 years, and we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Belfast Festival at Queen's in the autumn. The whole year is also punctuated by an extraordinary number of large and small events that, individually and collectively, can demonstrate that we, as a community, and, as one of my colleagues said, as a society, are moving on together sensibly, co-operatively and thoughtfully.

Of course, there will be differences of views and emphasis as this year and the years that follow roll past, and there will be many events that will mean more to some people than to others. However, we must all respect everyone's right to remember the significant events of the past that have, in one way or another, contributed to making us the people that we are and to making Northern Ireland the place that it is today. Therefore, I urge anyone and everyone throughout Northern Ireland who is considering how best to mark a particular anniversary in the coming months and years to do so in a manner that takes account of how their behaviour and actions will be viewed by others inside and, importantly for me as tourism Minister, outside Northern Ireland. The world is a very small place these days, and modern technology means that images of Northern Ireland can and will be beamed around the world pretty much instantaneously.

I am confident that the images that will be broadcast this year will be those that we want the world to see — positive, exciting and stimulating — and we need to make sure that that is maintained once the immediate thrills of 2012 and 2013 are behind us.

There will, of course, be a role for my Department, and in particular the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, in continuing to promote and market Northern Ireland as a place that everyone should visit at least once in their life, although I would say a lot more. I commend both organisations for their efforts in this exciting but very busy year.

I also accept that, as many Members said in the debate, the commemorations that we have been discussing today will involve other Departments and a great many individuals and organisations outside government altogether. That is why the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and I will bring a joint ministerial paper, which is at an advanced stage, to the Executive in the very near future, which will address the fundamental principles that will surround what we need to see happening in this decade of centenaries. I know that the need to put those fundamentals in place has been mentioned by a number of Members today.

I will be talking to other ministerial colleagues in the coming months, who will, in turn, talk to organisations such as the Community Relations Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Arts Council, National Museums Northern Ireland, the universities, the Public Record Office and countless other bodies as plans begin to be made. It is not solely for us to carry through all the plans and projects, but I wholeheartedly believe, as do the Executive, that it is for them and the public sector to give a lead.

There needs to be considerable community involvement throughout the process. Indeed, for the commemorations to be genuinely inclusive there will be a need for the close involvement of members of community organisations the length and breadth of Northern Ireland. We cannot allow a small number of people to decide how we celebrate and commemorate over the next 10 years. We need it to be inclusive, and that is true of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Governments of the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom.

In all such matters the key words might legitimately be balance and boundaries: any celebration or commemoration of an historical event must demonstrate balance. We know that there is no single, clear, agreed interpretation of history; indeed, too often, commemoration events take place not so much to remember the past but to use that past to make a modern

point or to legitimise a modern stance. I thought that Mr Frew's contribution was very true: we need to listen to the history of what happened, what are the facts of those years, and how do they affect us today? How can we learn from all that went before?

It is not about commemorating the past based on a partial myth, an isolated viewpoint or a narrow perspective. Context is everything in what the Executive are trying to do in relation to the commemorations and celebrations over the next 10 years. The commemorations must remain within the boundaries of propriety. Nothing must be said or done by anyone that could be interpreted as glorifying or justifying acts of violence or terrorism, irrespective of who carried out such acts; neither can there be any excuse for triumphalism.

With that in mind, I commend to the House the series of lectures that begins next week at the Ulster Museum and Stranmillis University College under the title of Remembering the Future. The lecture programme, which, I understand, has been organised by the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund, seeks to discuss the critical period in our history between 1912 and 1923. It will do so in keeping with five key principles that we can all accept: to start from historical facts, as Mr Frew pointed out; to recognise the implications and consequences of what happened; to understand different perceptions and interpretations; to show how events and activities can deepen an understanding of the period; and to see all of that in the context of an inclusive and accepting society.

However, I caution that, when we look at events of the past, we do not look at them through the eyes of someone who is living in today's Northern Ireland in 2012, because those things happened in a completely different era. Words such as "discrimination" do not put us in the context of where we were at that time, and that is all-important.

4.30 pm

I commend that series of lectures to the House; it will provide a very handy guide to what is happening in the coming years. We also want to remember Sammy Douglas's commercial: he always gives us a commercial of some sort. I look forward to an event on the Anglicans, Sammy, as well as the Presbyterians, which we have had today. We want to ensure that the

commemorations avoid some of the pitfalls to which I have referred. We need to enhance the reputation of this small part of the world as somewhere that has a fascinating and engrossing history but which is imaginatively moving forward from a troubled past to what we all hope will be a more stable, positive and prosperous future.

As I said, 2012 and 2013 offer a wonderful opportunity to celebrate Northern Ireland and to project a very positive image to a vast international audience. The decade of commemorations that will follow offers us a further opportunity to build on that new reputation and to demonstrate to that same international audience that we have genuinely and permanently come of age. I urge all Members to take full advantage of that opportunity and to do so with responsibility, maturity and, importantly, inclusivity.

I thank all the Members who spoke on the motion. I hope that I have covered most of the points that Members made. Most of them, including Mr Sheehan, referred to the importance of not deepening divisions. Mr Humphrey talked about a cocktail of diversity. Mrs Overend mentioned Mr Farry launching the WorldHost training programme; of course, that was a joint launch between DETI and the Employment and Learning Minister. She is right to say that the tourism strategy has not yet come forward from the Executive. That was an industry-led document that was drawn up by industry and given to me to bring to the Executive. It has been felt that since we are now in changed economic times, we need to take cognisance of the Programme for Government and the new economic strategy so that the tourism strategy sits alongside all those documents. I hope that the tourism strategy will come out at the same time as those other documents. Mr McDonnell referred to the fact that this is a test of our political maturity. I agree with him; we need to have agreed principles and protocols, and that is what the joint paper from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and me is all about.

Again, I commend Chris Lyttle and his party for bringing the motion to the Floor of the Assembly. It has given us a good opportunity, and, on the whole, most Members have taken the opportunity to be quite reflective and thoughtful about the time that is in front of us. I hope that that bodes well for the next 10 years.

Mr Lunn: The debate has been a really useful contribution to the general discussion that is ongoing about the next 10 or 15 years, and it is now gathering pace as we approach the first major centenary, the Ulster Covenant, in a few months' time. I wonder how the debate would have gone 10 years ago. I do not think that it would have been quite as agreeable as the debate that we have had today, and that, perhaps, is an indication of how far we have come in the meantime and is to be welcomed.

Anniversaries are always with us. We have a constant supply to deal with. Indeed, we are already at the point of 40 years from some highly significant occurrences within our memories, and by the end of the decade that we are talking about, we will be 50 years from those. That is a more significant date that will have to be dealt with, so, if we can agree, based on our motion, to handle the upcoming centenaries in an inclusive manner and for the relevant Departments here to work together to co-ordinate a common approach with the British and Irish Governments, we will do a great service to Northern Ireland, the Republic and the UK.

As my colleague said when introducing the motion, if we can meet the challenge, the coming decade gives us the potential to learn from our past and to shape our future. Chris also pointed out the obvious downside, such as deepening antagonism and reinforcing old divisions rather than focusing on future progress. He was right to put that warning on the record, as others have done also. However, I believe that the signs are encouraging, and the developments and actions of the past few years give me enormous hope for the future.

The Queen's visit to Dublin — to the Garden of Remembrance and to Croke Park and her momentous speech at Dublin Castle — has paved the way for us, just as President McAleese's visit to the Somme and the joint opening of the Irish peace park has done so much to put aside old enmities and prejudices. When history is being made in front of our eyes, we do not always realise just how significant it is, and we do not quite get the historical impact of current events. So, in years to come, the full significance of Her Majesty's actions and those of the president will become even more evident.

As others have referenced, the anniversary of the battle of the Somme had, until comparatively

recently, the potential to be divisive. However, that has surely now changed, and North and South can commemorate that sad but uplifting episode in our joint history together. It was just Ireland then, and Irish men from all over the island fought and died together and set aside their differences for the greater good. I had the privilege of visiting the Somme in 2010, and I pay tribute to the work of the Somme Association, which has always made the point about the all-Ireland aspect. Indeed, I should declare an interest as a member of the association.

I do not know how many Members have been to the Somme. I suspect that most of those to my left have, perhaps, been, and maybe a minority of those on my right have been. I see some nodding. I encourage them to go, and when they do, the contrast and the contradictions will stare them in the face. The fallen from Irish and British regiments are lying together, and there is a memorial for Major Willie Redmond, who was bravely fighting for the Allied cause while his brother pursued a different strategy back in Ireland. There is a stone in the Irish peace park engraved with the words of an Irish soldier. From memory, it goes, "I wish that I could see again the hills of Donegal; I'll be a traitor if I return but a hero if I fall". Those days are gone. We should look forward to that commemoration with confidence.

The other significant dates, such as the Ulster Covenant, the Titanic, the Easter Rising and the various dates at the end of the decade on partition, the civil war and the establishment of the Irish Free State are all contentious, but we can deal with them. Even as this debate was looming over the weekend, I heard constructive noises coming from Sinn Féin and the DUP and today, again, I have heard little of any kind of dissent from the thoughts —

Mr Allister: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lunn: I suppose that I did ask for that.

I heard Mitchel McLaughlin on the radio this morning talk about Sinn Féin's willingness to participate in the commemoration of the Ulster Covenant. He even talked about Sinn Féin organising its own commemoration. I am intrigued. The mind boggles as to what kind of commemoration that would be. However, that is positive. Nelson McCausland also talked on the radio about his willingness to participate in events to do with the Easter Rising. He qualified that a bit by saying that he could participate in

a panel discussion or, perhaps, attend a lecture. He may find that there is a bit more to it than that.

One of the successes of this Assembly has been to encourage trust and understanding, and we should build on that and, under the terms of the motion, acknowledge our shared history without rancour. It has been ably demonstrated today that we are capable of doing that.

I will turn to some things that Members said. Stephen Moutray talked about pivotal events and their potency, power and the almost nuclear aspect of some of them. That is fair enough, but he also said that we should remember the past with sensitivity and that he wanted cross-community support.

Mitchel McLaughlin gave us a history lesson. He did not get the year of the covenant right, but he got the date right, and I am very impressed with that. He said that Sinn Féin will participate when it is possible to do so and that it has a working group on the preparations. He also said — I think he was slightly at odds with his party colleague Mr Sheehan — that he was quite moved by the Queen's visit to Dublin. I think it was Mitchel who said that the GAA has said that it will attend any events that it is invited to. That is all positive stuff.

Robin Swann came up with one that I had not heard of — the Balmoral review in April 1912. That was a new one to me. We can all learn. He also advised us to go and search the records for our ancestors who may have signed the covenant. I am happy to tell him that my grandfather did sign the covenant. Mr Swann also highlighted the 10th and 16th Irish divisions and the potential for the 100th anniversary of the end of the war in 1918.

Conall McDevitt mentioned Lord Carson and pointed out that he was a Dubliner and a hurler, and that Mr Connolly was at one time a British soldier. There is no end to it. The contrasts hit you up the face when you look into it. Conall also said that there should be no rewriting of history by the master class. That phrase, "no rewriting of history", was mentioned by many people from both sides of the House, so there is agreement here.

William Irwin referred to the Orange celebrations and the difference between celebrating and commemorating. I will not go there. The 12 July is very much a celebration.

Pat Sheehan talked about the need to promote reconciliation and not deepen division. He talked about the 'Titanic' as being not quite apolitical and some nationalists still being lukewarm about it. Sammy Douglas reminded him that there were 3,000 Catholics who worked on the 'Titanic'. I believe that there were about 50,000 Protestants, but there we are. The point is that, when the world and his wife come here in a few months' time to look at the Titanic centre and to look at the place where it was built — thousands of people come to Cobh already every year, and they also go to the memorial in Newfoundland — they will not really mind who built it. It was a Northern Ireland achievement. It was an engineering achievement that was unparalleled 100 years ago.

William Humphrey mentioned civil and religious liberty for all, a cocktail of diversity and that commemoration should be inclusive. There we go again. All sides of the House. Sandra Overend rightly played up the role played by the Ulster Unionists down the years. Absolutely right. Alasdair McDonnell said that it should be inclusive and that it must be at Executive level. That is a point that was echoed by the Minister. The Executive have a serious part to play. Paul Frew mentioned teaching our young people "the history". I do not care if it is the history or our shared history. It is the history of this place, without bias, and I hope that we can go there.

I am sorry that I do not have time to mention other people's contributions. In closing, I want to say that a lot of people, more important than us perhaps, have played a part in bringing us together in the last number of years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Lunn: I am thinking of David Trimble, John Hume, John Major, Albert Reynolds, Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern, George Mitchell, Ian Paisley, Gerry Adams, Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness. In mentioning Ian Paisley, please forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to extend our best wishes to his DUP colleagues and his family. We have not heard much about Dr Paisley in the last few days. I hope that he is keeping well.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the number of centenaries of significant historic events affecting the UK and Ireland in the next 10 years; calls on the Executive to ensure that these are marked in an inclusive manner; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work together, with the British and Irish Governments, to develop a co-ordinated approach to the commemoration of these important events in our shared history.

Adjourned at 4.44 pm.



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