



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Armed Forces and Veterans Bill

24 November 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Allan Bresland
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr David McNarry MLA

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott):

Mr McNarry, you are very welcome to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). You are used to sitting at the other side of the table. I ask you to make a presentation on your Armed Forces and Veterans Bill. The meeting will be recorded by Hansard. I advise you that the Examiner of Statutory Rules has made some suggestions and recommendations and that the Committee has agreed that those should be made available to you. You can seek your own advice on them.

Mr David McNarry MLA:

Thank you, Chairman and members, for your invitation.

The Chairperson:

Your presentation should last no longer than 10 minutes, after which you should leave yourself available for questions.

Mr McNarry:

I will do my best.

I thank the Committee for its kind invitation and for the interest that it has shown in the Bill. I am aware of why the Bill is with the Committee for scrutiny. I welcome its being with the Committee and the opportunity to discuss it with members today. It is a simple Bill. It is simple to understand, is simple to relate to and, with the Committee's support, can be simple for the Assembly to adopt. As a member and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I am aware of the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) views and those of the Finance Committee on the Bill. I do not disagree with the transfer of lead Department from DFP, as was intended, to OFMDFM and, hence, to this Committee.

When the early draft was being worked on, there was a view that DFP, which controls the purse strings, would be suitable as the co-ordinator of the Bill, especially as there are no significant costs in the Bill's implementation. At that time, in informal discussion with the then junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson, I was given, and I accepted, a clear impression from him that DFP was comfortable with its role in the Bill. However, as things can be moveable objects, I would find it helpful should the Committee agree this afternoon to submit its amendments that would give effect to OFMDFM being the lead Department. I am sure that the Committee can see the sense in that, because OFMDFM is experienced in channelling crossover issues — there are many in the Bill — with other Departments and, therefore, in my opinion, is best suited to overseeing the Bill.

I have and understand the advice given to the Committee by the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and I am comfortable with his advice as I understand it. I rephrase that: I do not argue with his expert opinion. On the contrary, I trust that the Committee will find his advice most useful and helpful. I will add a few further comments on the Examiner's advice and suggested amendments.

I would find it beneficial for the Committee to accept his amendments and to bring them forward as Committee amendments. However, at this stage, I request the Committee's indulgence on clause 6, page 3, line 12. I have spoken to the Assembly's Bill Office about that and ask that I come back to the Committee. It may be a matter of misunderstanding; on the other hand, it may not be. However, in either case, with the Committee's permission, I would like to take the opportunity to advise members of the outcome following the Bill Office's clarification with the Examiner and myself on that.

Where the Examiner suggests a power to exclude the power to remove a Northern Ireland government Department from the list, I would welcome the Committee adopting, if it so wishes, that point as an amendment. Likewise, I would have no opposition to the Committee proposing amendments to change from regulations to orders the method of amending the list of authorities in clause 1(2). That has been suggested to the Committee.

This Bill has no hidden agendas. It brings to Northern Ireland due regard to the members of the armed forces, their families and the veterans and due regard also to the impact of functions on the services community. That is the genuine and honest purpose of my Bill; there are no other intentions behind it.

There is increasing concern in the armed forces and in the coalition Government that the complementary relationship with people and society is breaking down. Personal knowledge of the armed forces is diminishing. Aspirations and expectations are rising, and it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain personnel. We have a situation in which the armed forces operate beyond the level of military commitments that were planned for them, and it is increasingly difficult for them to reconcile life in the armed forces with expectations of a normal life.

My Bill seeks to take account of those commitments. Therefore, the proposals that relate to devolved matters include prosthetic limb provision; access to NHS dentistry; the health needs of veterans; getting onto the NHS waiting list; the roll-out of community mental health; affordable homes; adapted social housing; adapted affordable homes; disabled facilities; affordable homes that extend access for veterans; social housing with local connections; a certificate of cessation; homelessness; school place allocation; educational attainment; special educational needs; education and training for service leavers; basic skills for families; concessionary bus travel; blue

badge access; childcare provision; flexible careers in the armed forces; support to the volunteer reserve forces; support to the employment of service families; and the employment of service leavers in the public sector. The Bill will address the fact that they lose out on all of that, which is so important to the families and a good reason for me to bring it to the Assembly.

I have heard people's views about rights and equality, and I respect and acknowledge those views. I know it to be true that Members express genuine concerns — I hear them each day and express them myself — over people not getting the fairness that we believe they deserve. My Bill rectifies all of that for the armed services and puts a stop to children, in particular, being disadvantaged and made unequal. The Bill is an exercise in fairness and equality. It extends rights, which are available elsewhere in the United Kingdom, to former and serving members of the armed forces and their families in Northern Ireland. It has an important job to do and a businesslike, no-nonsense way of presenting that.

The Bill will be seen by many observers as a test of the genuineness of the commitment to equality professed so often by Members of the Assembly. It is a Bill with genuine and open intent. As I said, there are no hidden agendas, but simply a desire to extend rights that are already enjoyed elsewhere in our country. I ask members to reflect on that and to give the Bill fair passage in their considerations, because it is concerned with equality and rights and with decent treatment of individuals and respect. There is no political subtext as far as I am concerned. There has never been a time in which the public have been more aware of the sheer professionalism and dedication of our armed forces, often in the face of official neglect, often in the face of systematic and scandalous underfunding and under-equipping in the most dangerous of circumstances.

The Armed Forces and Veterans Bill has been adopted as a legal charter for our armed services personnel. It will press. It will press Stormont Departments to make sure that soldiers, their families and veterans are not disadvantaged because of their military service. It will extend rights that are available to armed services personnel and their families in other parts of the United Kingdom. I have had tremendous support for the Bill from serving personnel and veterans, who have written to tell me that there is a need for the Assembly to make improvements to what we do for them here in Northern Ireland. One person wrote to me that:

“The system is deliberately designed to frustrate, cause additional stress and, ultimately, hope that you will go away.”

Another person who contacted me stated:

“I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and, in the 21 years since my injury, I have never been offered as much as one session.”

He went on to say:

“Maybe, it’s because I just try and get on with things and because I may joke and have a laugh to keep positive. It keeps me alive.”

He ended by saying:

“But it is not like that all the time. I have not had a full night’s sleep in 21 years, and I refuse to dose myself with antidepressants.”

I will conclude on that. Those are just two examples of the many I have heard from real people who have suffered because they chose to serve our community and got injured.

In conclusion, the Bill is important to me because of how it addresses rights. I want to tell the Committee that I have deliberately not sought to lobby on the Bill. I have not made contact with the many organisations in our society, including the Royal British Legion, to ask them what they think of the Bill. I have taken that approach because I did not want to diminish in any way the integrity of the Bill or the people whose futures I am seeking, with your help, to address. I deliberately stayed out of that, so that I could not be accused of political lobbying on the Bill. The Bill is right for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, David. I need clarification on something, and that is —

Mr McElduff:

Chairperson, would it be appropriate for members to declare interests in this matter?

The Chairperson:

I was going to do that. I declare an interest as a former member of the security forces and a member of the Royal British Legion. Other members may wish to declare interests, but interests have been declared during previous discussions of the Bill.

Mr Bresland:

I declare an interest.

Mr Kinahan:

I declare an interest as an ex-member of the regular forces of the British Army.

Mr G Robinson:

I declare an interest as a member of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers Regimental Association.

The Chairperson:

David, our understanding is that, although DFP has indicated that OFMDFM should be the lead Department on the Bill, there has been no indication that it has accepted that, even though this Committee has agreed to take the Bill's Committee Stage. Is that also your understanding?

Mr McNarry:

All that I can refer to is a letter of 9 November sent from the Department to the Clerk of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I have the benefit of being a member of that Committee, and I am sure that this Committee has also seen that letter. In the letter, the Department states that:

“DFP is content with the provisions of the Bill. ... However we believe that the lead responsibility for those latter responsibilities might sit more comfortably with OFMDFM rather than DFP for the following reasons”.

The Department then goes on to give those reasons.

The Chairperson:

Yes, we have that letter.

Mr McNarry:

I am not aware of anything further to that letter.

The Chairperson:

OK.

Mr McNarry:

I know that the two Committees met and that the two Chairpersons met, and it was decided that this Committee would take the lead on the Bill.

The Chairperson:

Yes, the Committee agreed to take its Committee Stage.

Mrs D Kelly:

Thank you for your presentation, David. I am well aware of the sensitive nature of the discussions around the Bill, having attended the funeral of one of my constituents, Neil Turkington, not so long ago. I met some of his comrades who had suffered horrendous injuries during the conflict in Afghanistan.

I want to ask you about the definition of time in the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill. As a result of the conflict in the North, we have victims' services. All those who were injured in the conflict are defined as victims and should have access to the victims' service when it is up and running, on an individual needs assessment basis. I hope that that will take care of some of the health needs of those victims, because it would be very disappointing if the needs of victims were not met, and I was shocked to hear that many people are waiting over 20 years to get counselling. A lot of money and additional funding has been provided by OFMDFM for victims' services, and it would be useful at some stage to look at how that money is expended. In respect of a cut-off point, you referred to those whose experience was not what they expected when they joined up. I wonder whether you are suggesting that that was due to their involvement in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

You also talked about inequalities for children and set the stall out in terms of equality and rights. However, the way that I interpret it is that the inequalities are in how veterans and their children and families are treated here when compared with GB, rather than when compared with the general population. Is that the distinction? Is the inequality in how a veteran would be treated in GB compared with here in the North?

The Chairperson:

That is a quite a range of issues for you, David.

Mr McNarry:

It is much easier to be on that side of the table asking the questions.

The genesis of the Bill is that this has been adopted as the nation's charter by all the other regions in the United Kingdom. They have access to all the funds and so on that you talk about, but I took on board the fact that they deemed that it was an equality issue purely because of the disadvantages that they recognised came the way of members of the forces and their families and

those who became veterans later on.

At the start, I said that I think that the Bill is simple, and I hope that it is. I am trying to keep it as simple as possible. The sensitivities that there may be, even to the very mention of the term “the armed forces”, do not exist in any other part of the United Kingdom. I recognise those sensitivities, and I respect how people might react to them. I will have to deal with that and to convince anyone who has any strange opinions on that.

The Ministry of Defence is entitled to have up to 5,000 soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland. Serious numbers are added to that when their partners or wives and children are considered. That means that we can have a large constituency that really has no recognition whatsoever. In one sense, they are almost nomadic because they can be called out of here at any time because of the wars that you mentioned. Their families are left behind here, and it is those families, including their children, who find difficulties in accessing provision.

I am not asking that they be given any special privileges or that doors should be opened because of who they are. Nor are they, and nor does that apply in England, Scotland or Wales. They should have access to the same as everyone else, and, as far as I am concerned, they live here and are welcome here, and we should provide for them in the same way as we do for my family, your family or anyone else’s family.

Mr G Robinson:

I support David’s Bill entirely. I spoke to it at Second Stage, and I have not changed my mind one iota. I commend David for introducing the Bill. I had a close personal association with the armed forces for a number of years, and I knew them inside out. I agree with everything that David has alluded to, particularly his comments on the equality issue.

There are not as many armed forces personnel here compared with a few years ago, but in recognition of their work in the Province over the past 30 to 40 years, we should do everything in our power and push out the boat to ensure that life is made as easy as possible for the people who are left here. They made a significant contribution to the life of the Province, and they also created a lot of work in the time that they were stationed here. At one time, there were around 30,000 armed forces personnel, and I know that that number has been reduced significantly. I commend David on his Bill, and I support fully what he is doing and has done.

Mr McNarry:

Thank you very much, George.

Mr McElduff:

I find it difficult to hear the British Army story told so positively. I want to put on record that the British Army murdered my wife's brother.

The Chairperson:

Sorry, Barry, we will take —

Mr McElduff:

I find it difficult to hear this positive narrative —

The Chairperson:

Mr McElduff, we will take your comments when it is your turn to speak, if you wish to be included.

Ms M Anderson:

David, it will probably not surprise you to hear that Sinn Féin is opposed to the Bill. To pick up on Barry's point: the narrative about the British Army that you outlined is not the experience of the vast majority of the people in the republican and nationalist community. I do not share that narrative.

In the context of the hope that we arrive at a point at which either all human beings have equal rights or none have any, I do not agree with your analysis that this is an equality issue. In the list that you outlined, you are looking for preferential treatment. Section 75 affords equality of opportunity to everyone who lives here. We also have particular circumstances that necessitated the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO). Your list includes the employment of service leavers in the public sector as one of the aspects that you would like the Bill to address. In the process of framing and putting the Bill together, did you engage with the Equality Commission to see whether any of its clauses in any way impacted negatively on the duty that already exists in law?

Mr McNarry:

I am disappointed to hear that Sinn Féin cannot and will not support the Bill. I call on the Bill Clerk to deal specifically with the question on equality issues.

The Bill Clerk:

The Bill was drafted by the drafting service that is available through the Office of the Speaker. Bills are drafted by a firm called Winckworth Sherwood, which has a legal background. It is aware that Bills should be drafted according to the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Bill will have gone through the Office of the Speaker on its introduction by Mr McNarry. I mentioned to the Committee earlier the checks that would have had to be made.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires consideration to be given to equality, so there would have been those checks. We advise Members — it is in our guidance — that Bills are sent to the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission at a certain stage of their development. Those organisations will then be able to flag up any glaring issues. If the Bill has not been subject to that check, it is open to the Committee to discuss with Mr McNarry the carrying out of that assessment. It is not too late to do that.

Ms M Anderson:

Can we ask the Office of the Speaker what equality checking and screening has been done to find out what process the Bill has been through? Is it the Speaker who sends the Bill to the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, or is it Mr McNarry who does that? We seek some understanding of who should have contacted those organisations at the developmental stage.

The Bill Clerk:

There would be no problem with that. I am sure that the Office of the Speaker would be happy to deal with your enquiry. If you have legal questions, a more direct approach may be to ask Legal Services, as it provides that advice. I do not think that the information that you will get will be any different. If you go to the Office of the Speaker, it will ask Legal Services.

Mr McNarry:

I put on record my surprise that Ms Anderson is not aware of that.

Ms M Anderson:

I am surprised that you are not aware of it; it is your Bill. You have not been able to answer me.

Mr McNarry:

I am about to answer if you will let me. The most stringent demands are put on a Member who is bringing forward a private Member's Bill to meet the competency that the Speaker requires before he will allow a Bill to go to First Stage. This Bill has met those demands and fulfilled them as being competent. Therefore, it goes through all those ramifications, which says to me that it has met the legal requirements expected of it. I am satisfied with that.

Ms M Anderson:

Given that you referred to the Bill Office to answer the question that I posed to you in the first place, and given the response that we have had from the Bill Office, I would like confirmation that that process was carried out, whether through the Office of the Speaker or whoever, and that the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission were consulted in the way that they are supposed to be during the developmental stage of this Bill.

The Chairperson:

We will consider that proposal after we have heard all the evidence, because Dolores Kelly made a proposal earlier.

Mr Spratt:

David, I congratulate you on the Bill. I think that it is commendable, and I understand what you are getting at in respect of dealing with the armed forces. I want to deal with a couple of issues. It is surprising that those who espouse equality the most, not only around this table but in other Committees, espouse that equality only for certain people and not for everyone. Equality goes out the window in some people's view when it comes to the armed forces. It is disappointing that they are still at that point. Hopefully, they might move away from there someday.

I think that Dolores was being genuine in raising the issue of victims' money and the availability of services through the Victims' Commissioner. However, I see it slightly differently, and I wonder whether David could explain. I understand Dolores' point that some people in the Province come under that remit, but other people, who are part of battalions stationed throughout the whole of the United Kingdom and are serving in Afghanistan and other places, are from time

to time drafted into places such as Ballykinler, where there are issues with schools. When I sat on the South Eastern Education and Library Board, there were always problems in relation to schools, because troops are, as you described, a moving community. I understand the need for some sort of protection around that.

I understand the issue to do with National Health Service dentistry and such like. My goodness, it is true that some of our troops have suffered in a terrible way in Afghanistan — they have had terrible limb and other injuries — and then have had to go onto National Health Service waiting lists.

The cross-cutting nature of the Bill covers quite a number of Departments, including Health, Education and, probably, the Department for Employment and Learning. I understand why it clearly should be with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister because of the cross-cutting issues.

You will certainly have our absolute support for the amendments. I understand the amendments, and I think that this Committee should promote them because of the issues that have been raised by the earlier briefing that we had in closed session. I know that you are going to get a copy of that.

You will have our support. I am disappointed, although not surprised, at some of the views from across the table. I think that whatever can be done should be done, and the Bill will get us into line with every other part of the United Kingdom. Many of those troops come from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland. I am, therefore, disappointed that some people from the other side of the community cannot accept that brave individuals from their community are serving in the armed forces at this minute in time. I am also extremely disappointed that they do not accept that some of the brave people who serve presently in the forces out in Afghanistan and elsewhere come from the Irish Republic. We will certainly support the Bill and the equality issues around it, because those people deserve equality.

The Chairperson:

Before I call the next member, I remind members to ask questions to the proposer of the Bill as opposed to just delivering statements.

Mr Spratt:

Some other members made statements.

The Chairperson:

I have been quite flexible. You are next, Stephen, but that reminder is not a reflection on you.

Dr Farry:

It is all part of the process, I guess.

I was going to start off with some of the themes that Jimmy raised, but I will frame those themes in the form of a question to David. I am sympathetic to the Bill, but I am not prepared to say that I fully support it until we tease out a few of the issues.

David, are you basically saying that there is legislation covering devolved and non-devolved matters in the other three parts of the UK and that, in essence, there is a gap, because that does not extend to members of the armed services for the time that they are deployed to Northern Ireland?

Mr McNarry:

Yes, I am trying to fill that gap.

Dr Farry:

In that sense, it is an equality issue, because service families are affected as they move around the UK and are deployed internationally.

With regard to the point about victims, the issue of access to services is broader than the ability of people who are injured or wounded, either physically or mentally, in the course of duty to access services, because it is about the whole range of particular problems that service families have that is linked to their mobility and the fact that they have to move around. How can those people build up relationships with dentists, doctors and schools? There is a need for sensitivity in accommodating them. Is that essentially what you are trying to address?

Mr McNarry:

It is another connotation of the word "victim". As you say, they are victims of the circumstances

in which they find themselves here.

Dr Farry:

OK. I threw in my two easy questions first.

We have been dancing around a genuine issue, which has been the subject of discussion at Committee and which you are going to look at. That issue is basically about how the Bill sits with the very particular legislative framework that we have in Northern Ireland, be it section 75 or the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, which does not pertain to the rest of the UK. We could debate, for example, how applicable those precise equality measures are, when is the right time to use them and whether they themselves need to be amended. However, my real question is: to what extent have you engaged with the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission about those issues? There may be a subtle difference between your Bill being competent in respect of the Northern Ireland Act as things currently stand and it having implications, rightly or wrongly, for existing legislative frameworks. Do you accept that that is a core issue that needs to be scrutinised?

Mr McNarry:

I see where you are coming from. However, I ask you to appreciate that I did not identify the issue. Rather, those basic, ordinary rights were identified in the national charter. In Northern Ireland, we had to do something different, and that is part of the problem in our country. I said at the start that this is pretty simple and that it is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. Therefore, why do we have to do something different? Why can we not just adopt it? That is basically what I am asking for.

It is basically an accommodation of people who come to live in Northern Ireland. During that time, regardless of whether the posting is temporary or it turns into something more permanent, what is available to them in any other part of the United Kingdom should be available to them here. Why should they leave a camp in Dorset or wherever to come to Northern Ireland and then find out that they do not have access to the same things in Northern Ireland that they have left behind? They should not have to experience difficulties and, I imagine, trauma and to make a certain amount of adjustment.

When I was looking at the Bill and the needs that it was addressing, I did not have a clue that I

would find out that provisions for the needs of the forces, their families and veterans did not apply to Northern Ireland. All that I am trying to change is that they would be applied to Northern Ireland and be adopted here. I do not want Northern Ireland to set itself out differently to any other part of the United Kingdom. As a member said earlier, I do not see troops and their families as anything other than people. I see them coming into our community, and I have to say that I am very glad to see them coming back into our community to be greeted by their families, rather than their families going to Wootton Bassett, which is a lovely place, but it must be the most horrendous place to visit. I am concerned for the families who cannot welcome anybody back.

We, as a nation, asked those people to do a unique duty for the nation, and we should ensure, as best as possible, that they are not disadvantaged. The recognition in England, Scotland and Wales was that it was a disadvantage and it needed to be put right. That is the simplicity of it, and I hope that it does not get too complicated.

Mr Kinahan:

I congratulate David for bringing forward the Bill. I was hoping that such a Bill would be a sign that it was time to move on. I find the way in which I was asked whether I had an interest to declare slightly hard, as I feel that there was probably an interest on the other side of the coin. If people wish to go down that route, perhaps they should also declare an interest. I am not asking them to. It is time for all of us to move on.

There are severe inequalities for soldiers when they come home, particularly from Afghanistan. That is what we should be concentrating on. One of the suggested questions relates to how it works in other jurisdictions, and I want to turn that the other way round. Do people in other jurisdictions see it as unfair? Is there any backlash? Do people find themselves further down a queue because a soldier has been put up a queue because he has lost a leg?

Mr McNarry:

Our Health Service has responded tremendously well to the type of case that you are talking about. I do not think that it is a matter of someone getting put up the queue. I would have thought that that type of necessary treatment would find its own slot in whatever queue there was going to be.

It was quite a mouthful. Again, with deference to those who do not share in my constitutional politics, I say that this is the nation's charter. As far as I was concerned, that seemed to give it great effect and depth when people were asked whether they thought that it needed to be done. This was something that was being handed down to say that there is a gap and there is a problem. We have to balance a degree of fairness with a degree of disadvantage. Once people knew that there was disadvantage, no one could give any good reason, as far as I could find, that anyone in those circumstances should be disadvantaged. Therefore, they set about putting that right. That has been done in all the other parts of the United Kingdom. All things being equal, one would think that the charter would have come in here automatically. It has not. That is why I am asking for the Committee's co-operation so that we can make that adjustment and make that difference.

Mr Humphrey:

David, I commend you for the work that you have done to date. As Jimmy said on behalf of the DUP, we will be supporting the Bill.

When we discuss this type of Bill, we need to remember that, for generations and centuries, Ulstermen, indeed Irishmen, have been involved in peacekeeping at home and abroad. Very recently, one soldier from the Royal Irish Regiment and one soldier from the Irish Guards were lost in active service.

I am saddened, although not surprised, by Sinn Féin's reaction today. We need to remember that a sizeable section of the community from which I come, and beyond, on both sides of the border on this island, is committed to going out and being involved in peacekeeping. Peacekeeping is what they are involved in.

I want to put on record, as I did in my contribution in the Chamber a few weeks ago, my gratitude on behalf of those people, a number of whom have spoken to me, for the leadership shown by the SDLP this year when its members and its leader wore poppies, which was significant. The poppy is not a British thing or a Protestant thing. It is for people who want to recognise the contribution made by those, regardless of background and class, involved in peacekeeping on this island and abroad.

Northern Ireland is a better and different place now. My opinion is that equality is central to the Bill. For example, from conversations that I have had recently, I know of an organisation

called Combat Stress, which works with soldiers on the mainland. However, there is no such organisation here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I commend the Bill and commend David for his work.

In a divided society, it is going to be the case that people will take a different view. However, it has to be put on record that Her Majesty's forces, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the PSNI held the line in preserving some semblance of normality, law and order, and peace in this country during very difficult times. In my view, they prevented Northern Ireland society from slipping into anarchy.

The acceptance and mature recognition of the Bill across the Chamber would show that people are committed to a shared and better future in Northern Ireland. It is about creating a normal society.

Recently, I attended 'Black Watch', a play at the Belfast Festival at Queen's. It gave a powerful message about soldiers on active service, some of whom lost their lives.

David, how would the Bill work — for example, in its practicalities and outworkings — with local authorities and local government in Northern Ireland and with organisations such as the Housing Executive?

Mr McNarry:

Those are the kind of organisations with which the Bill needs to work. We are talking about recognising as a category someone who has been affected from being in the armed forces. Similar categories have been recognised for ordinary people in ordinary society. For example, if someone is disabled and needs structural alterations to where they live, they get that provision; if someone needs a wheelchair, they get one; if someone needs access to normal society, or as normal as is possible, such as going to the shops, they have it.

To be asked about finding a roof for over their heads is not exceptional. It is something that we may not do every day in our political lives, but, most days, people come to our advice centres or offices looking for help. They tell us that they are homeless. A member of the armed forces can be made homeless instantly and dramatically on leaving the service. All of a sudden, they have a giant turnaround. Having been used to the service and all that that implies, they are

literally on the street. They do not know who to contact or where to go; they are homeless. There is no special position for them in the queue, and they are not asking for one. The Bill might help to get them into the queue.

Mr Humphrey:

Mr McNarry is absolutely right. Last Friday morning, a young constituent called with me. He has left the Army and is having to live with his parents. We have a battle to try to secure the points to get the Housing Executive to give him a home. His brother will leave the Army in March. Two sons in that house will be in the position of having to live with their parents. They have served this country in an exemplary fashion, but they cannot get a home.

Mr McElduff:

Last Friday, I met a disabled young woman who is wheelchair-bound. She is having tremendous difficulty getting proper accommodation from the Housing Executive. I do not want her to be treated any less well than a former British soldier.

A lot of presumptions are being made that these are “our” armed forces. It is important for Sinn Féin to put on the record that they are not our armed forces. I am thinking of young Martin McShane who was killed on the GAA pitch in Coalisland by the British Army. He was an unarmed teenager. That has to inform the narrative of this debate.

I do not think that the Bill is about equality; it is about preferential treatment, special positions and sectoral discrimination. Do you accept that it is about pushing people up the queue and disadvantaging others? That is my perception of what is taking place. I restate Sinn Féin’s opposition to the Bill.

Mr McNarry:

Barry, you and I know each other well enough to call a spade a spade. I would like to think that that young woman whom you mentioned will be helped and that she will be helped because we are able to help her. I can only give you my assurance. If you believe me, you believe me; if you do not, you do not. I said that I have a very honest approach to this. It is not associated with all the things that you think are associated with me. I hope that I am not doing a disservice to anybody. I am not asking for anything for any member of the armed services that they are not entitled to. I am saying that that entitlement is being denied to them. I hope that you can

understand that that is why the Bill has been introduced. There is no reason for bringing the Bill other than to establish those entitlements. Preferential treatment is not in my mind. There is nothing preferential in the Bill.

Perhaps I can take you back to when you were Chairperson and I was Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Of course, you are still Chairperson of that Committee. We had some humdingers together, because of the view that you have about your Irishness, which I am learning to respect. I remember something that happened at one of those Committee meetings. You will correct me if I am wrong, if you want to be pedantic about it, but indulge me. You were not very pleased with me for using the word “gypsies”.

Mr McElduff:

On a point of accuracy, it may have been Willie Clarke who took exception to you at that time and the use of that word.

Mr McNarry:

It was Willie Clarke, but I am putting you in the role as well, because you are here and he is not. I was told that they are called Travellers. I am not knowledgeable about the subject. As I explained, I was brought up to call them gypsies. No disrespect was intended in my calling them that. Over time, and through what I recognise to be one of the best lobby outfits that Northern Ireland has ever seen, Travellers have established their due rights. They have not been prevented in doing so by me. They needed to establish those rights. When I looked into it at that time, it became clear to me that they had entitlements. I had not been fully clear on the subject and, therefore, rightly, wanted to learn about it.

I am not drawing corollaries or comparing Travellers to Her Majesty’s forces. I am saying that that was an opportunity for me to understand that Travellers’ rights had been established and that they were deserved. Therefore, I can only reach out to those who fought ably in that campaign for Travellers to ask them that they might, perhaps, give a little leeway with regard to what I am trying to do for soldiers.

I want to take another minute, Chairman, because I believe that this needs to have my thumbprint on it. I see people in uniforms only when they wear them. They are husbands and wives all the time, regardless of whether they are in uniform. They have chosen a job or career in

the forces. They could be in the Army, Navy or Air Force. They have families, as I do. I hear what has been said here. I hope that we are graduating. I can say about my family, and I am sure that many of you around the table would say something similar, that I have suffered because of my role and job in politics. I would not like to see someone, who has chosen to serve my nation — it is my nation, so let me call it that — in a unique way, suffer. To come back to the simplicity of the Bill, I ask whether it is a big deal. I hope that it is not a big deal because that is not where I am coming from. It just seems to me to be decent that we make way for those people and their families. They are us: they are part of our community.

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you very much, David, for that presentation and for answering questions. Obviously, you will be kept informed of the Bill's progress through the Committee.

Mr McNarry:

I appreciate that. Will you also get back to me on suggested amendments that the Committee might bring forward, so that I know where I am with them?

The Chairperson:

OK. Thank you.

Mr McNarry:

Thank you, everybody.