

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 17 September 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Spence Family Tragedy

Mr Speaker: Mr Edwin Poots has been given leave to make a statement on the Spence family tragedy, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I remind the House of the recent changes to the arrangements for speaking on matters of the day. Mr Poots and any other member who is called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. Members other than Mr Poots should indicate clearly that they wish to be called by rising in their place and should continue to do so as happens at Question Time. I know that Members from all sides of the House want to make a contribution this afternoon to mark the tragedy and send condolences to the Spence family. I ask Members, as far as possible, to be very brief, and we will try to allow as many Members as possible to make a contribution.

Mr Poots: At 7.00 pm on Saturday we were hosting a charity barbecue when I got a phone call from someone who had intended to come, saying that the Spence family had been hit by a serious tragedy, that two bodies had been found in a tank and that they were looking for two other bodies. The atmosphere was stunned as a consequence of the news that came through. Many people knew the Spence family. I have known Noel and Essie for over 30 years. They attended the same church as me, and they used to help out in the youth club. They used to take Mr Craig to that youth club many years ago. The family is well known throughout the community. They built up a very successful farm. Graham came home to work on that farm; he has two lovely little children. Nevin helped out on the farm when he was not playing rugby for Ulster and had come to be very well known for his skill on the rugby field. The Spences were all very physically strong men. Graham was also a very good rugby player. Nevin matched his strength with speed and agility, and he really was a phenomenal rugby player who would have gone far. Ulster will replace a centre — perhaps with one who is

not as good as Nevin Spence — but the family will never replace the empty chair in the home of a brother and son, nor that of Noel, a father and husband, nor that of Graham, a father, brother and son.

When we visited the home yesterday, the sense of shock in the entire community was palpable. Many people will have been at the wakes of those who have passed away in different circumstances. There can be a degree of conviviality at those wakes. However, this house was just very, very quiet, as a consequence of the death of the three men of the house. The Spence family have farmed in the area for five generations, and the community has come to know and love them. Two things will give them some crumbs of comfort. First, Emma, who was rescued by local farmers who were quickly on the scene and were then supported very ably by the Ambulance Service, the Fire Service and the Police Service, is home from hospital and will make a full recovery, certainly physically. Secondly, the Spences have a strong personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Noel, Graham and Nevin all sought Jesus Christ as their personal saviour. As a result, that family believes that it will be reunited. They have absolute confidence that they will be reunited in a place where there is no more pain, sorrow or tears.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I start by expressing my sympathy and that of Sinn Féin to the Spence family of Hillsborough. The tragic events of Saturday evening have shocked not just the farming community and the sporting community but the wider community base. People are genuinely shocked. Our thoughts and prayers are with the family at this very difficult time. One can only imagine the impact that this tragic loss of life is having on the family.

Farm safety is an issue that we all take very seriously. All opportunities need to be taken to raise awareness. Earlier this year, Minister Foster and I launched the farm safety partnership, which is an attempt to highlight the

dangers and pick up on some of the facts that we are all aware of. Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations. People often work for long periods on their own. They can be out for hours on end, working with heavy machinery. It is a difficult occupation to be involved in. We need to continue to raise awareness and work to improve farm safety.

I do not know the Spence family personally, but, by all accounts, including that of Minister Poots, they were a loving, gentle and hard-working family with a deep sense of family loyalty and a great faith. As we extend our sympathies, prayers and thoughts to the entire family at this very difficult time, we hope that they will find some solace or strength in the widespread public sympathies that have been offered.

Mr B McCrea: There are times when it is difficult to know what to say. There are circumstances that are so tragic that you have to ask yourself whether there is anything that can be said that will actually help matters. I think that I speak for all here and all in the community when I talk about the profound sense of tragedy, loss and sheer disbelief at how things could happen in such a manner. Given how the story unfolded, people can only imagine the tragedy in the last few minutes, how it must have felt and what people tried to do.

The nature of Northern Ireland is that we all know people. Members of my family spoke to Nevin at the rugby just the day before. My nieces talked to the family when they were coming back from Portugal. As Minister Poots said, they are a wonderful family and very well connected with the community and their church. You have to wonder how we can help and support the rest of the family. It is important to say, although I did not know all of the family, that it is a family tragedy. Not only was it Noel, Nevin and Graham, but all of the other people associated with it. In the wee small hours and the coming days, weeks and months, we will all do what we can to help the family and the surrounding community.

I conclude my remarks by offering, on behalf of the party, our absolute sympathy and condolences to the family. We really have to find a way of preventing such tragedies, which happen occasionally and repeatedly.

Dr McDonnell: I, too, offer my heartfelt sympathy and that of the SDLP to the surviving members of the Spence family. Mrs Spence Snr, her two daughters and Graham's wife and children are in the thoughts and prayers of our entire community. My condolences also go out

to the wider family circle, the neighbours and the wider farming community in the area where they lived.

Slurry tanks are dangerous, and, unfortunately, familiarity can often lead to unguardedness when it comes to safety. An unguarded moment can lead to a terrible tragedy, as we had in this case on Saturday evening.

The Spence tragedy has become international news because of the affection in which Nevin Spence was held in a much wider field. Nevin was not just an outstanding rugby player; he was an exceptional human being. My two children met him on many occasions, and they spent Sunday grief-stricken. That is how far his reach went. My sympathy goes out to Ballynahinch Rugby Football Club, with which he was associated, to Ulster and to the Irish rugby fraternity and to rugby players and supporters across Ireland and far beyond whose lives have been touched by this outstanding young man.

It is a tragedy for all of us, but it is a particular tragedy for those they have left behind: the mother, the sisters, the wife and the young family. I hope the prayers and sympathy of the whole community will continue to be with them in the coming days.

Mr Lunn: On behalf of my party and as a Lagan Valley MLA, I offer our sympathy, prayers and condolences to the remaining members of the Spence family. An unimaginable tragedy has happened. I understand from news media and from Minister Poots and others that the family has a strong faith. They will need that faith in the days to come, and I hope that it sustains them.

I was in church yesterday — Mr Givan was there also — and by coincidence the minister was the chaplain to Ulster Rugby, Andrew Thompson. I watched and listened to him struggling with words yesterday. He had been speaking to Nevin just the day before. I give thanks that Emma has been spared, and I hope that the family can somehow come to terms with this. I wish them well. It is hard to comprehend what has happened.

Mr Ross: It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of the grief that the Spence family are going through following the tragic deaths of Noel, Graham and Nevin on Saturday evening. The tribute from my colleague Edwin Poots was moving, and I am sure that everyone in the House will want to associate themselves with his words.

I met Nevin a few times, most recently as Chairman of the all-party group on rugby. On behalf of all of the members of that all-party group, I pass on our sincere condolences to the Spence family and indeed all those associated with Ulster Rugby, whom we have worked very closely with over the past number of months. Nevin was admired not just for his performances in an Ulster shirt but, as other Members have said, for the way he conducted himself off the pitch. The tributes that have come in from right across the world, not just from the rugby community but from the whole sporting community, are testament to the high regard in which he was held. I have no doubt that the entire rugby community — indeed, the sporting community, not just throughout Northern Ireland and Ireland but much wider than that — along with the farming community and the church community in Northern Ireland will come together to remember Noel, Graham and Nevin and give whatever support they can to the family as they go through this most difficult of times.

12.15 pm

Mr Byrne: As the agriculture spokesperson for the SDLP, I also extend sympathy to the family on the tragedy and, indeed, to the wider farming community. I also want to mention a young man who was killed in Fermanagh last week, Brian óg Maguire. Again, he was a great sporting individual, and, again, his family are suffering pain and loss. At this time, it is very important that we empathise with and support the families, who are suffering such tragedy.

Mr Ó hOisín: I also offer my sympathy to the Spence family. As a rugby fan, I know that the wider rugby community will be very affected by this. Nevin played 42 times for Ulster, and we were always very hopeful of his talent and ability. I also pay tribute to Brian óg Maguire, and I offer our sympathy to his parents, Brian and Eileen; his sisters, Roisin and Eimear; and his girlfriend, Maeve. Last week, young Brian took Lisnaskea Emmetts to their first senior final in 15 years. He was captain of the all-Ireland intermediate winning team last year. He represented Ireland at international rules, and he also played soccer with Lisnaskea Rovers. I offer my sympathy to his comrades in St Comhghall's High School and St Mary's University College. Go ndéana Dia trócaire ar a anam uasal. May the Lord have mercy on his soul.

Mr Givan: Yesterday, I was able to spend some time at the family home. The brokenness of that home is so clear, yet the dignity and the

Christian spirit are so evident. I know that, as everyone across Northern Ireland is supporting the family, we are praying for that family. It puts into context the things that you worry about in life. You really get a clear perspective of what really matters, the brevity of life, how important your family and your friends are and, of course, your faith. I am so pleased that we have a hope that the members of the Spence family who have been lost are united in heaven and that their family will join them again. We mourn with them now, but let us all pray that God will comfort them in that knowledge and surety that, again, they will be able to meet together.

Mrs Dobson: The entire farming community in Northern Ireland is in such a deep state of shock and sadness. For one member of a family to be lost in such circumstances is devastating, but three men dying like this cannot be adequately put into words. My thoughts turn especially to the women: Mrs Spence, her daughters, Laura and Emma, and Graham's wife and their two children. They will be trying so hard to come to terms with their loss. Farming families rely on tight bonds of love, and we hear in an act of true love that, when they got into difficulties, they were trying desperately to help one another. Farmers are a tight-knit community, and, from the many phone calls that I have received over the weekend, I know that farmers like myself are all grieving too. As a member of a farming family, I cannot help but think that it could so easily have been my own family, friends or neighbours where this tragedy occurred. I am sure that farmers across Northern Ireland will be having the same thoughts this morning. My thoughts and prayers are with the Spence family and the wider family circle.

Mr Craig: I join with my condolences to the Spence family. Edwin and I were at the same fundraising event when the tragic news came through. In many respects, it is a double tragedy for Edwin and me, in that these are lifelong friends. They are people we have known from our youth. I knew Noel's wife very well. Along with my aunt, we ran a small Bible club locally for children. I can recall teaching both Nevin and Graham in that club, so this tragedy has really struck home very close. All the major family connections in that area are absolutely devastated by what has happened. The entire male population of the family has been wiped out.

It was one of the largest farming families in our local community, and the tragedy has just absolutely devastated the communities in Annahilt and Drumlough, which, as has been said, are very close-knit. I praise my

neighbours, who helped the family on the night and helped prevent further tragedy, and I give much praise to the local farming community, who have rallied around to help and are helping the family even as we speak to run the farm at a time when the family circle has no one left to run it. Much praise to all those who have done that.

I will never forget yesterday going into that home. Essie embraced me, and the pair of us wept because words failed us both. What does anyone say to someone in those circumstances? I hope and pray that lessons will be learned from all of this that will stop further tragedies for other families. The one thing that I am absolutely certain of is the faith that that family has. That faith is based in Christ and Christ alone, and he is the one who will carry the rest of the family through this situation.

Mr Allister: If we in this House are all touched and shaken by this triple tragedy, as we clearly are, we can only imagine the depth of devastation in the Spence family as two generations of a farming family were wiped out in an instant, as one gave their life seeking to help the other. As Mr Poots said, there was a prestigious rugby talent in young Nevin, but the place in a rugby team will be filled; the places in this home will be vacant and empty. Therefore, I join in the condolences to the two widows and mothers, the fatherless children, the sisters and the wider family in expressing the heartfelt feelings that we all have about this tragedy. Human sympathy and support have their limitations, but I believe that this family, from its faith, will derive the knowledge and experience that the God of all comfort will be with them. That is the prayer of us all.

Mr Agnew: I offer my condolences to the Spence family on behalf of the Green Party at this very difficult time. Life is too short, and these lives were cut short much too soon. Each of us in the Chamber will have different experiences of the loss of loved ones, and we can only speculate and empathise with the emotions of the family and friends of Noel, Graham and Nevin. The one positive is that Emma is doing well, and I hope that the family, particularly Emma, will receive all the support possible from the community. I am sure that that will be the case. I share in offering condolences with the rest of the House.

Lord Morrow: I rise to speak simply because Mrs Spence is a native of Dungannon. The family home was at the hamlet of Bush, which lies midway between Dungannon and

Coalisland. I extend my sincere sympathy and heartfelt grief at this time to the family. She was a member of a highly respected family, and her brother had great expertise in another sporting world and still lives in Dungannon. I would like to be associated with all the remarks that have been made here this afternoon.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I have been given notice by members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's sitting beyond 7.00 pm. Under Standing Order 10(3A), the Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 17 September 2012 be extended to no later than 8.30 pm. — [Ms Ruane.]

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Ms Michaela Boyle be appointed as a member of the Audit Committee. — [Ms Ruane.]

Ministerial Statements

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Before I make my statement to the House, as the Minister responsible for the Health and Safety Executive, I give my deep condolences to the Spence family on this horrific tragedy. The executive will complete a thorough and professional investigation as quickly as possible and will bring its findings to me. I felt it appropriate to let the House know that that is the case.

Mr Speaker, with your permission I wish to make a statement. Last Thursday, Northern Ireland was shocked by the announcement that one of our major engineering employers, Caterpillar, intends to implement a redundancy programme that will see up to 760 people lose their job. Those redundancies will be completed by the end of 2012 and felt by the employees and their families across all four of the company's Northern Ireland facilities at Larne, Belfast, Springvale and Monkstown. As I said last week, on one of the worst news days for our economy in many years, this is a devastating blow for the employees, their families and their communities. They are at the forefront of my thoughts at this time.

Caterpillar has made it very clear that its decision is no reflection on the skills, productivity or flexibility of its workforce, and I am somewhat encouraged that, for the employees ultimately affected, the company is striving to reduce some of the impact by offering an enhanced voluntary redundancy package. It will also help to redeploy displaced workers by providing training on new skill sets, partnering with potential Northern Ireland employers to host job fairs and hiring a placement service. For its part, Invest Northern Ireland has already been in discussion with senior executives of Caterpillar to develop a joint approach to assisting the employees as far as possible. It will work with colleagues from across government, particularly those in the Department for Employment and Learning, which will offer a redundancy advice service and work in partnership with the Social Security Agency, further education colleges, HMRC and other agencies to provide information and professional advice about the options and support available.

In addition, I am able to announce a very positive and welcome development. Members will be aware that, for over a year, Invest

Northern Ireland has not been in a position to deliver a full business support programme to individuals interested in starting their own business because of a legal challenge launched following the original procurement exercise. As a consequence, a further tender competition was held, the outcome of which is being advised to the tenderers today. As with all such procurement exercises, a 10-day period will follow before the contract becomes operational and the successful tenderer can begin to deliver the contract. That means that, after over a year of being unable to provide a full support service to individuals who are interested in starting their own business, Invest NI will shortly be in a position to reintroduce a new business start programme.

Last week's news follows on from the announcement, earlier in the summer, that, for cost-competitive reasons, the company was releasing 160 agency staff as a result of its decision to move production of its 400 Series smaller generator sets aimed at the retail market.

12.30 pm

At that time, it also announced the launch of a global strategic review of Caterpillar's electric power division that aims to improve the company's longer-term competitiveness. It is the outworkings of that that we are now beginning to see and feel here in Northern Ireland.

Ongoing uncertainty in the euro zone has led to a drop in demand in the market. Although there is growth in Asian markets, new low-cost competitors have located in those markets, making the manufacture in western Europe of small generators very challenging. The reality is that the types of products that are being lost are relatively cheap retail generator sets for domestic and light commercial use that people buy on price. In Europe, demand has decreased substantially, and, in Asia, they are being duplicated in China at a much lower cost point. As a result, the company's global strategic review concluded that to maintain the overall competitiveness of the Caterpillar group it is necessary to manufacture smaller products closer to the marketplace where it can achieve the required economies of scale. It is those macroeconomic factors that led to the decisions announced last week.

Major multinational companies are constantly assessing and adjusting their business models to ensure that they remain competitive and efficient. On many occasions in recent years, Northern Ireland has been a beneficiary of such

decisions, by attracting new inward investors of the calibre of NYSE Euronext, CME, Citi, and Allen and Overy. Unfortunately, as we saw last week, sometimes we are not so fortunate. When the company announced 160 job losses in July and a global review, we feared that further bad news would follow.

We are fully aware of the challenges of the global economy and the continual shift of low-cost manufacturing eastwards. Over the years, we have seen it in textiles, shipbuilding, aerospace and other manufacturing sectors. Therefore, we were shocked by the numbers, if not by the trend. We know that a long-term sustainable economy cannot be based on low-cost functions, but we were completely shocked by the magnitude of last week's announcement, which came to light only a few days before the public announcement.

As soon as I was made aware, I immediately contacted Bill Rohner, vice-president of Caterpillar's electric power division, and made contact with Doug Oberhelman, Caterpillar's chairman and CEO, expressing my grave concern at the number of potential job losses and seeking the opportunity to meet him and his team to discuss the decision in more detail. Mr Rohner told me that it was a difficult decision, taken in the face of increasingly competitive global economic pressures. I sought assurances from him that the company is still committed to Northern Ireland, and he assured me that that is the case and that it intends to maintain a presence in Northern Ireland — an assurance that I have also received in writing from Doug Oberhelman.

I was already scheduled to travel to the United States next week, along with the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland, to support Invest Northern Ireland's ongoing work to attract high-quality inward investment and build trade opportunities for our local exporters. I will be meeting Bill Rohner during that visit to get a better understanding of the potential future impact and to see whether there are opportunities for us to mitigate the outworkings of this recent announcement.

Despite last week's news, we must not lose sight of the fact that, even once this very painful process has been completed, Caterpillar will remain a significant part of the Northern Ireland economy. Since acquiring FG Wilson in 1999, Caterpillar has invested £43 million on research and development activities, £129 million of capital expenditure and paid £30 million in corporation tax. In growing its business over the past 12 years, it has also paid around £700 million in wages and salaries, which has also

had a substantial impact on the wider economy as that money has been spent.

In support, Invest Northern Ireland has provided £25 million of assistance, most of it in the early years as the company grew its workforce significantly. The support provided in more recent years has included £2 million for skills development, £2 million in research and development and the development of an engineering centre of excellence to help move up the value chain and help us attract those new functions.

In recent years, Invest Northern Ireland has worked closely with Caterpillar management to build its capability to focus on higher added-value activities and identify and exploit new business opportunities. The company will continue to manufacture higher-value, larger gen sets in Northern Ireland — products that can continue to be manufactured on a competitive basis locally. We have also been successful in attracting various elements of the company's support functions to Northern Ireland, thanks to the skills of our workforce. As a result, we now have over 200 people employed supporting Caterpillar's IT and finance functions.

The company has confirmed to us that, if, as a consequence of last week's announcement, it has any financial liability to Invest NI, it will honour that liability. I will use our meeting next week to try to identify whether there may be opportunities to grow those Caterpillar operations further and, indeed, to see whether there may be other functions in the group's operations that could be competitively serviced from a Northern Ireland base.

If last week's terrible news tells us anything, it is that the strategy, which we, through the Executive, set and endorsed in the Chamber to rebalance, rebuild and grow our economy, is the right one. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to collectively focus on increasing the size, competitiveness and value of our economy by embedding innovation, growing our local companies to scale, increasing our export base and attracting high-quality inward investment.

As I mentioned, no modern economy can compete on price alone; that is a race to the bottom. However, we can compete and succeed on quality, and we are doing so successfully. As our traditional sectors have faced the challenge of low-cost competition, we have done two things. First, we have worked with many of our manufacturing companies to help them to move up the value chain by

embracing innovation in its widest sense. We have also helped them to not only invest in research and development but enhance the skills of their workforce, apply new processes and technologies and break in to new markets. That approach has yielded substantial results, most notably in our aerospace sector, where Bombardier has played a tremendously important role in developing the overall capability of the sector. However, there are plenty of other examples of success, such as Wrightbus, which, from its Ballymena headquarters, is successfully exporting its StreetCar product to Las Vegas and Hong Kong.

Secondly, we have replaced many of our traditional sectors with new ones, which are growing. Our financial services sector employs 26,500 people in over 1,200 companies; our business services sector employs over 15,000; and our growing technology and creative industries sector employs 15,000.

Last year alone, the average salaries of jobs from new inward investment increased by some 31% on the previous year. That illustrates the absolute quality of jobs that we are attracting from companies such as CVS Caremark, Axiom, Cowen Group and Intune Network, many of which have average salaries that are well in excess of £40,000. Those are exactly the types of projects and jobs that we need to continue to focus on attracting to Northern Ireland.

We have an enviable reputation in areas of advanced manufacturing through companies such as Andor Technology and Schrader Electronics, and we are global players in advanced composites engineering. There are also major opportunities to grow emerging sectors such as legal services, e-health and renewables. Many global names now have a presence in Northern Ireland, and, following the recent arrival of Chicago Mercantile Exchange to join NYSE Euronext, Belfast is the only European city, apart from London, to have two major stock exchanges.

Since April this year, Invest NI has made over 1,800 offers of support worth over £36 million and has a healthy level of potential projects in hand, which, if they all come to fruition, could see almost a £500 million investment in our economy and the creation of some 2,700 jobs from foreign investors and locally owned companies. That means that we are well on track to deliver against the 25,000 jobs in the Programme for Government.

However, although we are supporting the creation of new, good jobs, in some sectors, such as retail and construction, jobs continue to be cut more quickly. We continue to encourage our local businesses to literally push their boundaries by exploring new export markets, and we now have a market presence in 27 countries across the world to help them to identify and exploit opportunities. However, we recognise that some of those jobs will be put in place over a period of years, and we continue to encourage businesses to make use of the jobs fund, which was specifically designed to enable businesses to create jobs quickly. It too is delivering, having created 1,600 jobs over the past 18 months, a number that is expected to rise to 2,400 by the end of the financial year.

We are also widening our support to enable many more businesses. Through the Boosting Business campaign, over 10,000 enquiries have been made to Invest NI's business support team, and 1,500 new projects are in the pipeline, over 80% of which have come from companies that, historically, would not have been engaged with Invest Northern Ireland.

To support economic development, we will unashamedly use every tool that we can and we will continue to press for the devolution of corporation tax. My Executive colleagues and I are pushing to get a conclusion to the corporation tax discussions this autumn. That work now requires a political decision to be taken at Westminster. Whilst it would not solve all our economic challenges, it would, in my view, be a significant game changer. We estimate that it would enable us to double the number of jobs we secure from inward investment, resulting in 50,000 new jobs by 2031. Equally importantly, it would enable many more of our local businesses to release funds to fuel their future growth.

Last Thursday, a meeting was held for Executive Ministers who hold portfolios that directly relate to the economy. At the meeting, we discussed what more we can do to support our local economy at this difficult time. Areas that we discussed included: looking at how Invest NI could provide additional finance for working capital in businesses; how the planning system could help boost the economy; how we could provide additional funding for roads maintenance; how we can assist our towns and cities by lessening the impact of car parking charges; and looking at our rating policies. Work is now going on across all Departments, and we will have a further meeting of the Executive on economic matters in late October.

Members can all agree that last Thursday was a dark day in the history of our economy. While our immediate priority is, rightly, to focus on the needs of the individuals, I hope that we can all also agree that, collectively, we need to focus on continuing to build the high value economy that will deliver sustainable, quality employment opportunities.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment):

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis sin. I thank the Minister for her statement. Before I respond to it, I, too, wish to be associated with the comments of the House in expressing sympathy with the Spence family. It was an awful tragedy that shocked everybody who lives in rural areas. There is a great sense of loss, and our thoughts and prayers are with the family at this time.

In regard to the Minister's statement, last Thursday, as we sat at the ETI Committee, we heard the news of this sudden body blow to the entire community, as we saw hundreds of jobs disappearing at the whim of an international pen. The Assembly has a collective responsibility to do what we can to help people through these very difficult and traumatic times. The Minister is attending the ETI Committee meeting on Thursday, and it would be helpful if she could go into the sequence of events in some more detail. However, as I mentioned earlier, it is for us all to work together to help and to see people through these difficult times. It was drawn to my attention this morning that a European globalisation adjustment fund exists. If there have been a minimum of 500 redundancies, an application can be made through a member state for people to get job search assistance, careers advice, training and retraining, a job search allowance and a mobility allowance. That helps not only those who work in the company but their suppliers. Given the magnitude of this particular layoff, I think that it would be a very useful route to at least explore. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Mrs Foster: It was remiss of me not to congratulate the new Chairman of the ETI Committee at Question Time last Monday and to thank the outgoing Chairman for the work that he carried out with the Committee. We had a good, if, at times, robust relationship, and I am sure that that will continue.

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

The Chairman mentioned a number of issues. First, in relation to the sequence of events

leading up to last week's announcement, as I have indicated, in July, we were made aware that some agency jobs were being moved out of Caterpillar. Indeed, they were going to look at it from a global point of view and to have a company come in and look at Caterpillar in relation to its competitiveness. If the Member has the press release from the company, he will note that, in the headline, it talks about long-term competitiveness, moving forward. That is where it is looking at this from. Therefore, in July, we were aware that that work was taking place. However, as I said in my statement, we knew where the trend was in relation to small generator sets, but we were not aware of the scale of the reduction until early last week. I immediately contacted the vice-president, Bill Rohner, who has direct responsibility for the electric power division, and I also made contact with the CEO and chairman of the company. I actually asked the chief executive to wait until I had the opportunity to speak directly to him before he made the announcement in order to see whether there was anything further we could do. However, he decided to go ahead with the announcement. That does not take away from the fact that I will meet Bill Rohner early next week to explore all the avenues and to see what we can do at all the plants owned by Caterpillar in Northern Ireland.

12.45 pm

I am very interested to hear what the Member has to say in relation to the globalisation reduction fund. I will explore that immediately, if Invest NI has not already looked into it.

The Member makes a very good point in relation to the supply chain to FG Wilson. I understand that the supply chain to FG Wilson is large but perhaps not as large as the one to some of the aerospace companies. However, suppliers are dotted right across Northern Ireland, not least in my constituency. In relation to that reduction, it is important that we work not just with Caterpillar but with all the supply chain companies to help them through these difficulties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that, although the Chairman is given a certain amount of latitude, that is not extended to others.

Mr Ross: FG Wilson is obviously part of the fabric of east Antrim, with plants in Larne and Monkstown, and the impact has been severe since the announcement on Thursday. Obviously, there are short-term and longer-term challenges. Many of the short-term challenges,

in respect of training and support for those who have lost their jobs, will perhaps be addressed in the next statement from the Minister for Employment and Learning. In respect of FG Wilson's longer-term sustainability, will the Minister tell the House what support Invest NI can give to help the company maintain its global competitiveness in the future? From her conversations with Caterpillar, can she give an assurance that it is still intending to commit to Northern Ireland in the future, particularly in the manufacturing of higher-end, more expensive generator units?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Back in July when the initial job losses were announced, I said that we needed to look to higher-value jobs and, indeed, manufacturing, and that has been shown to be the case. Invest Northern Ireland will work with the company to search out other work that Caterpillar is carrying out across its global sites in order to see whether we can assist with that in Northern Ireland. As I said, we have been able to do that with some very large companies that operate on a global basis. I think that there are opportunities for us to do the same with Caterpillar and to bring some work to Northern Ireland, in particular the sort of high value-added work that, we believe, we can do very well.

Over the past number of years, we have been working with Caterpillar to encourage it to do more research and development at its sites here. Indeed, as I said in my statement, it availed itself of £2 million of assistance from Invest Northern Ireland to carry out some research and development at the Larne site. We will look for more of those opportunities in the coming weeks.

As I indicated, I wrote to the CEO and chairman of Caterpillar. In his letter to me, dated 11 September, he said:

"Please be aware that our current plan is to continue to manufacture large gen sets from Northern Ireland and are actively looking for other work we can bring to our Northern Ireland facilities."

I take that as an opportunity, and I intend to follow it up next week. There is certainly recognition of the skills and ability of the local workforce at FG Wilson, and I very much hope that we can bring further work to the company, be it in Larne, Monkstown or, indeed, Springvale in Belfast.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, I was heartened by what you said. You did say:

"growing our local companies to scale".

Does the Minister agree with me — indeed, from your statement today, I take this to be the case — that now is the time to robustly embark on a programme of enhancing what is already there to promote SMEs in rural areas? Quite a lot of the workers at FG Wilson come from rural areas. While in those areas we have small and medium-sized enterprises —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr McMullan: — that continue to grow, they do need more help. Invest NI has got some programmes there, but we need more funding and help. Minister, would you agree that now is the time to embark on that programme?

Mrs Foster: Last year, 70% of Invest Northern Ireland's money went towards helping indigenous companies. There is a fallacy going around that Invest NI helps only foreign direct investment. That is not true at all. If you look at the money and the way it was spent last year, you will see that 70% of its budget went towards helping indigenous companies. I am very encouraged by that, but we can do more in relation to access to finance. We have talked on many occasions about the role of the banks in helping the economy to grow in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, that role does not appear to be forthcoming. Therefore, Invest Northern Ireland set up the growth loan fund, a £50 million fund that could be accessed by companies that were not able to get money from banks but had growth plans. I am very pleased to say that there have been a huge number of enquiries to the fund, resulting in 28 business plans at present. Do not forget that the fund has been open for only a short period, and five of those loans have been approved for companies right across Northern Ireland. I am looking to see whether I can make an additional bid to the Finance Minister for more money to go into the fund because the single issue I am always faced with when I talk to companies is working capital and the fact that the banks are bearing down heavily on companies. I take Mr McMullan's point about helping indigenous companies. That is exactly what we are doing.

Mrs Overend: I and my Ulster Unionist Party colleagues are, obviously, shocked at the scale of the job losses at FG Wilson and are

concerned about not only those families that have now lost the major breadwinner but how this will impact on the Northern Ireland economy.

I refer the Minister to page 3 of her statement and the announcement in early July of the 160 jobs losses. Since the announcement last week, Alastair Hamilton said that the company was contacted and there were meetings at ministerial level with Caterpillar and FG Wilson, yet the Minister herself said that there was none. I would like clarification on what the Minister or her ministerial colleagues did between July and the time of these announcements on jobs. What specific contact was made between July and now?

Mrs Foster: I am glad the Ulster Unionist Party is now addressing the issue at hand instead of putting out unbelievable press statements, as it did on Thursday. They were mawkish and grotesque, frankly, when we should have been concentrating on the families. Indeed, her party colleague was sitting beside me at the Executive table looking for solutions to the difficulties that were in front of us and which continue to be in front of us, but the party was more interested in putting out statements that were, frankly, beneath contempt.

I have to say that that does not surprise me, because, since the Member became the economic spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, we have had many statements from her, none of them strategic. It has been hugely disappointing how the Ulster Unionist Party has addressed the issue before us. All other parties have managed to come to the table and try to address the issues that are in front of us.

However, I will address the issue that the Member has now brought before the House. It is the case that in July we were told that there was a trend developing. Invest Northern Ireland had many interventions with the company to see what could be done, but we were not aware of the outcome of its global investigations until early last week, when the company made contact with Invest Northern Ireland. I immediately contacted Bill Rohner, the vice-president, and the chairman and CEO. I spoke to the vice-president after he made the initial announcements in July, and we did everything we could, but the fact is that we are dealing with a global management of a global firm. In many cases we are going to have to lift our game in respect of manufacturing excellence.

It is disappointing that the small gen sets will now be made in China, but, unfortunately, that

is not surprising. FG Wilson and Caterpillar were bringing in products from China, fitting them into the small gen sets and sending those sets back to Asia. Unfortunately, that is not a sustainable way to do business. We now have to find higher value pieces of work that we can bring to Northern Ireland so that we can continue to grow our manufacturing industry.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement. As an East Antrim MLA, I make no apology for concentrating my questions on what will actually happen to the people in Larne, Monkstown, and in the constituency of East Antrim, who will lose their jobs. I appreciate that you have a wider remit in respect of these matters.

I attended the meeting of Larne Borough Council and Larne Enterprise Development Company (LEDCOM) on Friday morning, at which your ministerial colleague Sammy Wilson was also present. It was a highly constructive meeting, and the company has agreed to participate in similar meetings in the future. Minister, what specific efforts do you intend to make, along with the MLAs from East Antrim, to help to deliver jobs for the people of East Antrim, from Larne right through to Monkstown?

Mrs Foster: As the Member rightly acknowledged, I am not just the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for East Antrim but have to perform that task for the whole of Northern Ireland. I am sure that he recognises that.

I very much welcome the task force that has been set up by the council in conjunction with the other elected representatives. The company and Invest Northern Ireland will also participate in that. Representatives from different regions often come to me and ask me about directing companies specifically to their regions. I have to say to the Member that the skills that are available in East Antrim will, in and of themselves, be attractive to companies that are looking for those sorts of skills. They should continue to build up the excellence of those skills. That will draw companies to them.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. I probably should declare an interest, as one of my sons is an employee of the company. Indeed, he is there only because he lost his apprenticeship when another small business went down the tubes.

Hopefully things can stabilise, but it is clear that the emerging situation has far-reaching implications for my constituency. My question

is similar to Mr Dickson's. Minister, what can be done, in conjunction with the local economic development units in Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey, to deal with the impact of these job losses?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member. I recognise that this is very much a human story. Sometimes, when we talk about figures and statistics in the House, we forget that. Indeed, I attended a funeral on Sunday, and I was approached by a member of staff from FG Wilson who wanted to talk to me about the implications of the job losses.

As I said in my previous answer, all the agencies in east Antrim need to work together. I know that my ministerial colleague will have a lot to say about the work that DEL will do in the site in east Antrim. Indeed, I understand that DEL has had a presence in the plant since the announcement was made in July. It is about working in partnership with DEL and its redundancy service; the Social Security Agency, further education colleges, HMRC and, importantly, the company. As I understand it, the company very much wants to work with us as we move forward. I think that that is a very helpful way to move the whole debate forward.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. I note that, in her response to Mrs Overend, the Minister took a bit of a swipe at the UUP and its approach to the issue. I am a wee bit disappointed that she missed taking a swipe at it on its plan B. The UUP put out several press statements on its plan B, but there were no plans or suggestions in those statements. Maybe she is waiting for the party leader to get up to address that one.

Returning to the issue, the Minister and the broader Executive have responded very proactively to the crisis, and rightly so. Will the Minister clarify whether a similar process is put in train every time there is a significant announcement of impending or planned job losses? About a fortnight before the announcement at FG Wilson, there was an announcement that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question please?

Mr Flanagan: — 390 jobs were to go in Target Express —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, we need a question on the statement.

Mr Flanagan: — with 150 jobs going in Lisnaskea, Newry, Derry, Nutts Corner and Cookstown. What action did the Minister take to address those job losses?

1.00 pm

Mrs Foster: There are about three questions there. It is vital to remember that the Ulster Unionist plan B is a simple plan; that is the key. As for coming together at a time of job losses, we were, in fact, coming together to address the unemployment statistics, which had been published the previous day. Those unemployment statistics, which, for the first time, had risen above the UK average, contained some telling issues. Sometimes, it is easy to look at the headlines, but we need to look beyond them. Some 8,000 people have come off the economically inactive register and onto the unemployment register or into a job. We need to find out which is the case. Have they come off one register and gone onto another, or are they finding employment? For the first time since the second quarter of 2008, the number of jobs created has increased, which was a significant issue that we needed to address. It was helpful that Executive colleagues, at the request of the First Minister, all came together, because, as the Member will acknowledge, the economy is much more than DETI; it is about construction jobs, town centre retail jobs and car-parking and rating issues. For me, it was a very helpful discussion, which, as I said, we will continue at the end of October.

The Member and his colleague have raised the issue of Target Express on a number of occasions. I want to clarify something in relation to Target Express: I have not been asked by the company to intervene with the Revenue Commissioners in the Republic of Ireland. Neither Mr Lynch nor Mr Flanagan has requested that I do so. They have asked me questions about the matter, but they have not asked me to intervene. I cannot intervene in particular companies whenever I feel that I should do so. I have to be asked to intervene, and, indeed, I have intervened. Mr McElduff asked me to intervene on two occasions, and I have done so. If there is a particular issue that they wish me to intervene on with the Revenue Commissioners, I will do so, but I cannot do that of my own volition.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions should be brief and must relate to the ministerial statement.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that those words are probably said to keep me in line. What are the

long-term prospects for FG Wilson, on the understanding that China is a very — I will use the term — unregulated area? As far as patents are concerned, it seems simply to fly in the face of everything. I am worried that that line of the business will disappear and that ultimately the rest of the business could also go away on the basis of what has happened with the small gen sets.

Mrs Foster: I understand the Member's concern, which I know is genuinely held. Indeed, a number of people have raised that concern with me. All I can say to the Member is that the main market for small gen sets is Asia. The euro zone market for small gen sets has all but collapsed. The company was finding it more and more difficult to be competitive in Asia because those small gen sets were being made by its competitors. As I said, small gen sets are sold on price, so it really is a race to the bottom. As I mentioned, the CEO and the chairman have indicated that the company will continue to make large generator sets in Northern Ireland and that it is actively looking for other work to bring to our Northern Ireland facilities.

It is up to Invest Northern Ireland, the company and me to take a strategic look at the entire Caterpillar global entity, as it were, to see what opportunities there are for Northern Ireland to follow up on. That is what I have been told. The company has stated in writing that it will be in Northern Ireland for the future. From our perspective, that is important. FG Wilson is an indigenous firm. It was set up in 1966 by Fred Wilson, an uncle of one of my ministerial colleagues. He had a real drive for manufacturing in Northern Ireland, and I want to see the company survive and thrive again. When FG Wilson was taken over by Caterpillar, about 1,800 people were working at the plant. When the redundancies are taken out, that will go down to 1,500. We want to build up the firm again in conjunction with the company, and I am very hopeful that we will do so.

Mr Nesbitt: I acknowledge the Minister's reference to the human impact, which, as she knows, will continue to ripple through supply chains and traders. What is her early assessment of the impact of the multiplier effect? In fact, what multiplier will the Executive use?

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland is working with the company and hopes to establish a database of FG Wilson's suppliers. Some of those suppliers will be industrial manufacturing suppliers to the company, and it is those that

we are most concerned about. We will work with the suppliers to see what we can do to assist them to build up their work again.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give an overall assessment of our economy in the wake of FG Wilson's announcement? The substance of the announcement reflected the fact that this very large multinational company is capable of moving capital and its workplaces across the globe. If it can happen to FG Wilson, it can happen to any firm in Northern Ireland. We are most vulnerable. What is your assessment of the current position?

Mrs Foster: I take from his question that the Member is asking about the impact on the manufacturing sector in particular. At the lower skill end, we should be very aware that we are competing on a global scale, particularly with global companies. That having been said, there have been some manufacturing successes recently, including B/E Aerospace in Killeel, which continues to invest in research and development. The theme is investment in research and development. B/E Aerospace employs 650 workers in Killeel. Bombardier continues to grow. It has over 5,300 staff and is creating a centre of excellence for what it is doing on Queen's Island. As the Member is aware, Wrightbus continues to work very hard: over 30% of London buses are now manufactured in Ballymena, and it recently secured a £41 million contract to supply 550 double-decker buses to Singapore. In advanced manufacturing, one in five of our computer devices contains a part that has been manufactured in Northern Ireland at Seagate in Londonderry, and, at the other end of the scale, some 40% of the world's mobile stone-crushing and gravel equipment is manufactured in the mid-Ulster area.

There is still a core manufacturing ethos in Northern Ireland. I very much hope that we will have some better news in the manufacturing sector in the near future, and, when that comes, I hope that it will provide opportunities for some of those who have sadly been made redundant.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement today and the actions that she has taken to date to address the issue. Will she advise us what Invest NI is doing to ensure future support for other existing manufacturing businesses so that they can remain competitive in the world markets?

Mrs Foster: That relates to the previous question. We must encourage our

manufacturing companies to move higher up the value chain so that they can be competitive in higher-value manufacturing. That is certainly the case for Wrightbus, Bombardier and Seagate. There are opportunities for innovation and research and development even in the area of mobile screening and crushing. Invest Northern Ireland will seek out such opportunities with those firms, as well as working with them to see whether they can help them through the jobs fund, through the Boosting Business campaign or through the growth loan fund, which, as I said, is proving very popular with a lot of companies.

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for her statement. As she indicated, Fred Wilson was the founder of the company, and he was an uncle of mine. One thing that Fred always ensured was that quality was instilled in manufacturing. Will the Minister give us some assurance that the company will maintain that quality? I have some concern that the smaller gen sets that are to be made in China will not match the quality that has been set in Northern Ireland and will consequently damage the company's reputation. Will she also indicate what other job prospects are in the engineering sector in Northern Ireland, so that the 760 staff might find work?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I indicated that he has a very personal interest in this firm. I share his concerns about quality, and we have made that point to the firm. I have seen the FG Wilson name on generators across the world, and we want to protect the firm's reputation for quality. That is something that I will raise again with Bill Rohner. When I meet him early next week, I will say to him that we are concerned about quality. We want the FG Wilson sticker to denote quality right across the world, and we want to ensure that that is the case.

I hope that there will be further announcements later this week and into next week about job opportunities for those who are to be made redundant. My ministerial colleague will say more about skills and how he intends to work in the coming days with people in the Larne area and, indeed, in west Belfast and Monkstown.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. There are always positives in such statements. The Minister, rightly, referred to the fact that this business was originally set up in 1966 by Fred Wilson, a long-term resident of, I may say, Lisburn. It was largely based on his inventive genius; everything stemmed from him. So, it is an indigenous business. I am pleased to see in

the statement the introduction of a new business start programme after a year's delay, which, I take it, will replace the Go For It programme. Will the Minister give us either an idea of the scale of that programme or any figures for it?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the figures in front of me. The Member will know that I am delighted that it is coming to the end of that process. Of course, we have to allow the settle-down period, in case — heaven forbid — there is another challenge to the procurement. I hope not. I hope that we can get back to offering that full service to start-up companies, because I know that that is something that people have long been waiting for.

Mr Beggs: On top of the previous announcement, the loss of 760 jobs will have a devastating effect on the workers, their families, the local community, suppliers and the retail sector, unless we can encourage fresh job opportunities in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. The chief executive of Invest NI recently indicated that he had thousands of jobs in his pipeline and he was confident that they would be delivered. Is the Minister satisfied that there are adequate opportunities and space for new investment in east Antrim? Will she ensure that such companies are made aware of the skills that are available?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, one of the strengths of the workforce in the east Antrim area is the skills that it can offer to anybody who is looking at opportunities. Certainly, when there is a skills surplus, we always like to draw it to the attention of people who are looking for opportunities. That is exactly what we will do. We are pleased to see that the foreign direct investment pipeline has opened up a little more recently. It closed down at the beginning of the year, but it has opened a bit more now, and we are confident that we will be bringing more jobs announcements before the end of this financial year.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister referred in her statement to trends and broadened the debate over and above the manufacturing industry. I know that the Executive are committed to growing the agrifood sector, for example, in tourism. Will the Minister indicate whether the new agrifood strategy board has a budget with which to work? What are her hopes for job creation by Christmas, particularly in the agrifood sector?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. She has, rightly, pointed out the

excellence of our agrifood sector. The agrifood board has not yet reported or given its initial findings to either the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development or me. Of course, we have been very clear with the board that we want this to succeed, because it is an industry that continues to give us growth figures year on year and we want to help it, particularly in new and emerging markets and, dare I say it, in places such as China, which we have been talking about a lot today. We will support them in any way that we can, and, if that means more money, we will push for more money for the agrifood sector. Obviously, I will have to compete with other colleagues for that, but I very much believe in the agrifood sector.

1.15 pm

Mr Allister: In what might be a surprise to the people of Larne, the Minister tells us that her strategy is working. The reality is that, five years into the DUP/Sinn Féin coalition, unemployment has spiralled by 150%, from 26,000 people to over 60,000. Meanwhile, the Executive have been thrashing about, talking a good talk but still presiding over economic decline with no policy, it seems, other than perhaps attacking and reducing the amount of money available in the block grant —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Allister: — through chasing the rainbow of corporation tax powers. Is it not time that the Executive fronted up and admitted their failings?

Mrs Foster: Is it not time that the Member looked beyond his constituency and realised that we are in the middle of a global recession? Maybe he does not realise that; maybe it has not hit his local newspaper.

Mr Allister: Excuses.

Mrs Foster: "Excuses", he says. This is the man who did not even want us to have devolution. This is the man who did not want us to be here. If the Member believes that we would be better off with direct rule, that is a matter for him. Devolution has delivered more jobs for this part of the United Kingdom, and, if he does not believe that, let him look at the facts. He is a great believer in the facts, but it is about time he started to look at them.

Mr Allister: Unemployment is a fact.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It has been a long time since I had to remind Members not to make remarks from a sedentary position.

Mr Agnew: The Minister made reference to 1,800 offers of support, worth some £36 million, from Invest NI. In the past, many of these offers of support have not been taken up due to companies' inability to gain match financing. Will the Minister assure us that we will not see further Invest NI money handed back to the Executive because of the inability to find match funding for projects, or has she reason to believe that we should be more confident?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, I cannot find match finance for companies, although I have been trying to assist with access to finance through the growth loan fund. We are in the middle of a global recession. We are taking all the applications that we can. Of course, Mr Allister is completely against us having the lever of corporation tax powers. As I indicated in my answer, £30 million of corporation tax was paid by this company and, if we had corporation tax powers, that would have allowed for reinvestment by that company, making it more competitive. Mr Allister sticks his head in the sand and does not accept that.

In relation to Mr Agnew's point, we will continue to work closely alongside companies to look for answers to all the difficulties that they face. The Boosting Business project has been going well for companies, as has been universally recognised. Of course, had Mr Allister had his way, we would not have had any of that at all.

FG Wilson: Job Losses

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make a statement on the actions that I and my Department are taking in relation to the job losses at FG Wilson. First, I join my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in expressing my sympathy for and solidarity with the workers who face redundancy and, indeed, others who will be affected by the economic impact of this development. I and my officials have been proactive in determining what steps we can take to assist with redundancies, to provide upskilling and to identify alternative employment.

Under employment law, redundancies of this scale do not come into effect for 90 days. My officials have been engaging with FG Wilson in relation to redundancies since the earlier announcement was made in June. FG Wilson management has expressed a clear commitment to working with the Department and other agencies to assist employees. Tomorrow, my officials are meeting with FG Wilson to plan further for the delivery of advice clinics. In offering the redundancy advice service, my officials will work in partnership with the Social Security Agency, further education colleges, HMRC and other relevant agencies. This free service is crucial in supporting employees to determine their next steps. I am keen to ensure that DEL services are offered to those affected across all three affected sites, and I will encourage those employees to avail themselves of the help and support available. I will ensure, with our partners in the redundancy advice service, that employees at each of the three sites, in Larne, Springvale and Monkstown, will be provided with information and professional advice about the options and support available to them, including benefits, employment, training and education opportunities, as well as careers and taxation advice.

The redundancy advice service will arrange a series of initial group sessions, followed by individual meetings with each of the employees affected. The initial group presentations will outline all services available to them, and the redundancy advisory service partners will have information stands and staff available during group and one-to-one sessions. More detailed and personalised one-to-one sessions will be available for all employees, either at follow-up sessions, held preferably at FG Wilson's premises, or at an office of one of the redundancy advisory service partners.

The workers affected by the job losses have high technical skills, good employability skills and a wealth of experience. Some of the identified skill sets in the FG Wilson workforce include those of engineers, research and development specialists, managers, supervisors, administrators and manufacturing operatives. Evidence shows that, frequently, people with such a background can leave the unemployment register more rapidly than is average and, indeed, may never even join it. However, there can sometimes be a need to refresh skills or convert general skills to meet the new specific demands of alternative employers. Accordingly, my Department has already been in discussion with the further education sector — the Northern Regional College in particular — on the critical role that it can play in providing assistance to employees. The Northern Regional College is itself a centre of excellence in manufacturing and mechanical engineering. Based at the Farm Lodge campus, this centre of excellence has a long track record of developing and delivering courses to meet the needs of employers. Strategic partnerships have been developed with key employers, including Michelin, Toyota, Ryobi, Bosch, Wrightbus, Schlumberger and Langford Lodge, providing tailored training provision to meet particular business needs. Through the centre of excellence, the college can offer a range of manufacturing engineering courses at levels 3, 4 and 5 delivered by highly skilled lecturing staff. Testament to the training expertise of staff was the college winning the UTV Business Eye award for its partnership work with Ryobi Aluminium Casting, as well as the Apprentice of the Year Partnership award. Recently, the college worked with FG Wilson to provide a range of courses to its employees. The college's business support unit also has experience in supporting previous redundancies in its catchment area.

In light of the importance of the engineering industry to the Northern Ireland economy, the college, along with the Belfast Metropolitan College at Springvale, is offering to conduct a skills audit of individual members of FG Wilson staff to assess their current levels of skill, identify any skills gaps they may have and deliver training provision on a flexible basis to meet their needs and match them with potential job opportunities. This service will be supplemented by my careers advisers, who can also carry out a detailed skills assessment.

The challenge then becomes one of finding new jobs for such skilled workers. Therefore, it is timely that I am due to convene the first meeting of an advanced manufacturing and engineering services working group later this

week. The creation of this body follows concerns raised by employers in the manufacturing and engineering sectors about a shortage of engineering skills. I asked the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills, Bill McGinnis, to meet employers in the sector to help me to gain a more thorough understanding of their skills needs. At a stakeholder meeting on 25 June 2012, the adviser gave an overview of his findings. A short report outlining his findings, together with an analysis of the sector, is available on my Department's website.

The working group includes business leaders from the sector, employer representative bodies, representatives from the colleges and universities and other Departments and agencies, including DETI, the Department of Education and Invest Northern Ireland. FG Wilson is represented on the working group as a nominee of the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce. The aim of the working group will be to put in place an action plan to address the current and future skill needs of the sector. When I meet this group on Wednesday, we will consider the FG Wilson job losses and, especially, the fact that employees have the opportunity to have their skills assessed and to participate in a tailored programme of training to meet the needs of any employer. I fully intend to use this opportunity to talk to employers in the sector to see what more we can do collectively to help to redeploy these skilled and experienced people in the manufacturing sector to help meet existing skill needs.

In considering the redundancies at FG Wilson, some care needs to be taken against the temptation to make general assumptions based on some cases. Of course, given the very dynamic nature of the global economy and, in particular, the continued rise of other locations of economic activity, the nature of international competition will change and will have implications for local manufacturing. Northern Ireland should not and, indeed, cannot seek to compete on low cost of labour. We can only compete in the context of high-quality products produced by highly skilled workers and backed up by excellence in innovation, research and development.

In considering the job losses we need to set them in the proper context. The manufacturing sector remains critical to the Northern Ireland economy and will be pivotal in determining and improving our economic performance. Although locally there clearly has been a significant loss of manufacturing jobs over recent decades and a shift to the service sector — a shift shared with most western economies

— Northern Ireland nevertheless retains a significant manufacturing presence. Estimates suggest that the sector accounts for 11% of total Northern Ireland jobs in 2012, with the main subsectors being food manufacturing, fabricated metal, transport equipment and rubber and plastic manufacturing. The importance of the manufacturing sector is also clear, in that it accounts for over 15% of Northern Ireland's gross value added and generates sales of over £12 billion in markets outside the region. Running across this range of activities and products, we have a particular strength in engineering and advanced manufacturing and possess a range of world-class companies.

The Executive's economic strategy reflects our shared objective of expanding the private sector in Northern Ireland and promoting export-driven growth. In addition, the strategy reflects the recommendations of MATRIX, the science and industry panel, and identifies advanced engineering as a clear potential growth area. My Department's skills strategy, 'Success through Skills — Transforming Futures', sets out the likely skill requirements over the next decade. It includes a general emphasis on demand for higher-level skills and specifically for qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, more commonly known as STEM. Earlier this year, I announced that my Department's employment and skills provision would be focused on a number of priority sectors. The advanced manufacturing and advanced engineering sectors are included in that list. That decision was informed not only by MATRIX but by the report of my adviser on employment and skills entitled 'Identification of Priority Skill Areas for Northern Ireland'. The purpose of that report was to advise on the imbalances between skills demand and supply and the skill areas that should be prioritised to encourage more people to train and acquire the economically valuable skills needed to help develop the Northern Ireland economy. At present, our local universities are producing over 800 engineering graduates across all levels of study every year. Similarly, there are over 700 engineering apprentices in training. Moreover, I will announce shortly the creation of Northern Ireland's first higher-level apprenticeships at level 4, starting with ICT and engineering. Therefore, investing in engineering skills remains of strategic importance to Northern Ireland in order to meet potential new growth opportunities.

1.30 pm

A reduction in the rate of corporation tax here has been identified as a key economic tool for

attracting and retaining investment in Northern Ireland. The Executive have committed, in the Programme for Government and in the economic strategy, to press for the devolution of corporation tax and to reduce its level. That resolve remains and, indeed, has been strengthened by recent developments.

Increased demand for higher level skills will continue to exist even without a reduced rate of corporation tax. However, an external report, which I commissioned this year, into the potential skills requirements arising from a lower level of corporation tax indicates that a reduction in the rate to 12.5% could create double the number of jobs that would otherwise be produced locally. That equates to 58,000 additional jobs by 2030.

The baseline scenario within the current corporation tax regime shows there will be an additional 57,000 jobs by 2030 compared to 2012. Therefore, including the 58,000 additional jobs from a lower tax regime could result in 115,000 net additional jobs overall. Of the 58,000 additional net jobs created as a result of a lower corporation tax rate, 2,000 are expected to be in the advanced manufacturing sector from across new FDI firms. There will also be multiplier effects for existing businesses in Northern Ireland. The research shows that our skills base, in particular in STEM subjects, will be critical in driving out the full benefits of a lower corporate tax regime.

Northern Ireland retains a strong footprint in manufacturing. Indeed, in advanced manufacturing and engineering, it has the potential to expand. Beyond the immediate management of the redundancy issues of those affected by the job losses at FG Wilson and indeed elsewhere, my priorities focus on offering reskilling opportunities in line with Northern Ireland's economic strategy and emerging opportunities.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):

Minister, once again that was a long and comprehensive statement. At the risk of getting your ire, I will say that sometimes we might say more by saying less. It takes a long time to deal with these issues. I have no doubt that the Committee will have a number of questions about your specific initiatives. First, at the Committee meeting last week, we talked to you about the 29 consecutive months in which Northern Ireland had the highest, or second highest, claimant levels. Will you tell us whether there are any other shocks in the system? Have you done a risk analysis of the vulnerable companies and the big employers in

our society and economy? What steps are we taking to mitigate those risks?

Secondly, I am sure that the Minister agrees that manufacturing is still at the very core of Northern Ireland's economic prosperity and that it adds value and gives real jobs. What steps will he take to reassure the people of Northern Ireland that engineering and manufacturing are the future and that one disappointment does not mean that there are not really good opportunities?

Finally, the European Commission proposed a €7.4 million fund from the globalisation fund for former workers of the Vestas Group in Denmark who previously made wind turbines. That market has downturned and gone to China. It is not dissimilar to what has happened here. Has the Minister had any interaction with that fund? What can we do to make sure that the workers of FG Wilson get the best possible help and support to ensure that their absolutely wonderful skills are not left on the scrapheap?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his questions. There are four different areas to respond to him on, the first of which is unemployment. There is no getting away from the fact that we have a serious problem with unemployment. It is a growing problem that has been with us over the past number of years. It is also a problem that we share with many other regions of the UK and, indeed, elsewhere in Europe. It is a complex, multifaceted and multidimensional issue. We need to look at the number of jobs that have been created and the fact that we are shifting people from economic inactivity into the labour market. We want them to move into jobs, of course, but the fact that we are tackling economic inactivity is a good thing in itself.

The Member also mentioned risk assessment, and I fully understand his point. DETI and Invest Northern Ireland would probably wish to take forward the issue, but it is important to stress that, regrettably, some companies in Northern Ireland will decrease in size and, sometimes, shed jobs as markets change and the relevance of products changes. Equally, new companies will come into existence and provide new sources of employment, and other companies will grow. We have to ensure that the latter outstrips the rate of decline of the former.

That brings me to the Member's other point about the importance of the manufacturing and advanced engineering sector. The reason that I made the statement in the manner that I did was that I did not want simply to refer to the

immediate steps that we are taking on redundancy and support for upskilling and finding new opportunities. It is important that we stress the importance of the manufacturing sector to Northern Ireland and say that it is very much part of our futures.

The profile of manufacturing will change, of course, as the nature of global competition changes. Indeed, there may be areas of low-value-added manufacturing in which we will not be as competitive as we were. However, there are areas such as agrifoods, which has already been mentioned, and advanced engineering in which we have the potential to turn out world-class competitive products. It is important that we back up those sectors by investing in higher skills to meet employers' demands.

Finally, the Member refers to the European Union globalisation fund, which the ETI Minister has undertaken to explore. Certainly, she and I have open minds on the issue, although I suspect that the attitude of our parent member state is not overly accommodating about it. No doubt, we will report back to Members on those discussions.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that his officials have been engaging with FG Wilson since June this year. Will he elaborate on the nature of those negotiations? In light of increasing levels of unemployment, which is of grave concern to all Members, will he assure the House that the services and initiatives to which he referred in his statement will be provided in a timely fashion so that the workers at FG Wilson benefit from them at this very trying time?

Dr Farry: I am grateful for the Member's comments. I am happy to confirm that we will be proactive in providing services to any member of the FG Wilson workforce who faces redundancy. Individuals may not be fully aware as to which jobs will be going. We have had ongoing dialogue with FG Wilson over the past number of years. The reference to June concerns the work that we have done on the assistance by the redundancy advice service and to staff who were in the first tranche of redundancies. Before that, we had been in ongoing discussions with, and providing services to, FG Wilson on skills support and facilitating some upskilling. Indeed, the Northern Regional College has an established track record in that regard.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I have read the statement, which

has no reference to rural dwellers. That may not be an omission on his part, but the issue needs to be brought up because the redundancies affect not only urban areas but rural areas. All the problems that arise from people not being able to avail themselves of further education training are felt in rural areas. Will the Minister assure the House that the difficulties that rural dwellers face today on further education, and so on, will be borne in mind when his programme is rolled out?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McMullan for his comments. Certainly, we are always sensitive to the rural aspects of Northern Ireland. He referred to further education, and I recognise and welcome the flexibility of that system and its ability to respond to the direct and ongoing needs of business and workers who face challenges from retraining around their skills knowledge. There is a commitment from the Northern Regional College that if we put in place a number of conversion courses or, indeed, other types of training, they will be developed very flexibly. That is primarily geared at reflecting the fact that, over the next 90 days, the people who are affected by redundancy will still be in post. They will be holding down jobs, so we need to talk with FG Wilson about how we can ensure that business can continue while we invest in the future of the workers who are about to lose their job. I recognise that that flexibility also extends to people who have difficulty with transport. Ultimately, the bottom line is that we will try very hard to find alternative sources of employment, but those may not necessarily be in Larne, where people have had jobs in the past. There is a great strength in engineering across Northern Ireland, but opportunities may become available beyond the immediate travel-to-work areas. We need to factor that in, and I am sure that my colleagues from East Antrim will bend my ear on that in a few minutes' time.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. In these times, it is not an easy issue for any Minister to have to contend with. The Minister's statement is about reskilling and re-employment initiatives. As part of the personalised interviews with each individual member of staff, will the company audit the skills base of all the staff? Will the Minister assure the House that, as well as meeting members of the business community and employer bodies, he will meet other stakeholders, including training providers in the area to ensure that localised training programmes are necessary in this case?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question, and I commit that we will work with an open mind with anyone who can provide a solution to the issue of retraining. Our priority is to try to channel it through the Northern Regional College. It is important that there be a single interface with the company, but, below that level, there may be a whole range of different avenues and options that we can explore. I am very keen that we devolve that to the individual level and that we look at each worker as a person, rather than simply as a number, and place people in very general approaches. We need to specialise and see where people's individual aptitudes are and what we can do to support each person individually.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. You will forgive me for asking questions on matters that directly affect constituents of mine in East Antrim, as I did of the previous Minister who spoke. Although I appreciate the work that your Department is doing to deliver redundancy advice and, indeed, provide training, can we be assured that that will also be delivered very locally, and be very focused locally? In addition to the employees who are unfortunately losing their jobs in FG Wilson, can you assure us that you will also be looking out for the knock-on effect on suppliers and traders — for example in the town of Larne — to ensure that they get similar support from your Department?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dickson for his question. The preference is to deliver the advice service in-house for the workers who are affected by the redundancies. That means delivering it directly on the premises of FG Wilson. That works best for the company and best for the individuals who are affected, to minimise disruption and maximise the opportunities to consider alternative options. Of course, there are other strong engineering companies in east Antrim. Schrader and Ryobi are two that immediately spring to mind, and, no doubt, there are others as well. The issue will be one of what levels of vacancies exist elsewhere, what issues regarding shortages and mismatches exist, and to what extent we can match the skills sets of the people who are unfortunately leaving FG Wilson with those alternative companies.

It is also important to acknowledge the Member's other point. The focus on skills support does not apply only to workers from FG Wilson. My Department is available for any company in Northern Ireland to discuss their skills needs, and any company that needs to enquire about retraining of existing staff should

contact the skills solutions service in DEL to discuss its individual company needs.

1.45 pm

Mr Ross: In his statement, the Minister correctly said that many of the individuals who are leaving FG Wilson are skilled and experienced workers who could be an asset to other companies. He mentioned two other east Antrim companies, Schrader and Ryobi, in the previous answer. Could he indicate the level of interest that other Northern Ireland companies have shown in being willing to work with his Department to reskill some of the workers who are losing their jobs and in potentially providing employment for them?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ross for his question. It probably takes me into the realms of the advanced manufacturing engineering services working group, which we are convening on Wednesday. Over the past number of months, a lot of Members have reflected, from their own constituencies, engineering companies that are seeking to grow and that have their own inherent strengths but that, at times, have expressed a mixture of concerns about skills and difficulties in attracting personnel. So, we are hoping to initiate a discussion on Wednesday — FG Wilson will hopefully be at the table — about companies' profiles and any vacancies and skills requirements that they have. We are also hoping to see how we commence the challenge of trying to match those workers who are, unfortunately, leaving FG Wilson, of seeing whether there are some immediate new opportunities available and, indeed, whether, with some additional training and conversion courses, further people could be placed.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. These are very dark times, especially in my constituency of West Belfast, which already suffers from high unemployment. That not only affects those who are losing their jobs but, as someone said, the surrounding businesspeople will take a knock. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment spoke earlier about new employment opportunities that may come before the end of this financial year. Will the Minister tap into that and, with that knowledge, will the people who may lose their jobs in this situation be reskilled and trained to take up any opportunities that might come down the road?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments, and we appreciate the impact on

West Belfast. The Member will be pleased to know that Belfast Metropolitan College is willing to partner the Northern Regional College in the provision of upskilling, and that will hopefully be delivered at the Springvale campus in west Belfast.

I cannot comment directly on what may or may not be in the Invest Northern Ireland pipeline, but a lot of good work is going on behind the scenes. However, I will confirm that my Department works very closely with Invest Northern Ireland on the skill needs of companies that wish to either grow in Northern Ireland or to invest in Northern Ireland. We have a programme called Assured Skills, which is very much about us giving a quality assurance to an investor that the skill requirements are either in Northern Ireland at present or that, where we identify deficiencies, we will put in place tailored programmes to provide workers with the skill requirements that the investing companies require. That type of provision will often be delivered through the further education sector.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you will be aware that the public probably prefer to interface with their politic representatives through local constituency offices rather than through Parliament Buildings. With that in mind, will you be prepared to make staff from the redundancy advice service available to speak with staff in constituency offices to make sure that they are adequately prepared to give the advice that is needed?

Dr Farry: I do not want to give an absolute definitive answer to that, because we have to take into account some of the resourcing considerations of that. However, if it is possible to do it, I will certainly ensure that it is done, because the commitment is to try to tailor and individualise service as best as possible. I see merits and value in the service being delivered in FG Wilson itself in the first instance. I think that that suits all the parties, but whether we are talking about the CAB or a local constituency office in individual cases, we will be happy to try to consider that one-to-one support, if that is the most effective way of addressing needs.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for your statement, Minister. The scale of FG Wilson job losses has been unprecedented in recent years, and there will a knock-on effect on suppliers, the service sector and even retailing. Given that dramatic effect, will the Minister do everything to try to draw down from the globalisation fund, which would effectively double the funds

available for training and assistance to encourage those people to be reskilled and re-employed? Will he speak to the Secretary of State to have that argued for in Cabinet so that the Government will support it at Westminster?

Dr Farry: There is no arguing with or getting away from the scale of the redundancies that have been announced. We are dealing with a very sobering reality, and no doubt it is felt most acutely in Larne, Monkstown and west Belfast. As has been said by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, it is something that we are happy to consider and explore fully. That certainly means discussions with the UK Government, but I want to caution the House that, although we will give it consideration, that does not mean that there will be no unintended consequences. We want to be sure that it is something that we can deliver. I do not want to unnecessarily raise expectations that there is a magic pot of money out there from which we can draw down. The Member certainly has my commitment that we will give it full discussion and exploration.

Mr Lyttle: As a Member for a constituency that has also grappled with global change in manufacturing, I extend my thoughts to the workers affected by this brutal development. I also recognise the immediate support that has been offered to the workers. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that, on a long-term basis, people in Northern Ireland meet the skills demands of a modern manufacturing and engineering sector?

Dr Farry: Obviously, there is a much wider dimension beyond what we do to assist the workers directly affected by this. I and my ministerial colleague make the point that Northern Ireland can only compete internationally based on the quality of our products and, in particular, of our skilled workforce.

We have an economic strategy in place that has a very strong theme around skills. My Department has its own skills strategy and we have an employer engagement plan associated with it. We have a very clear plan to drive up skills across a very broad front. We will need to increase the higher-level skills — level 4 and above — from a baseline of 33% to around 52% by 2020. We have a very strong need to increase the number of people who are trained in the STEM subjects as well.

The projections show that Northern Ireland can create a lot more jobs over the coming decade, once we are through the current economic

difficulties. However, the vast majority of those jobs will require higher-level skills, so there is an imperative that we act now to drive up skills in anticipation of the jobs that, I hope, will come in future years.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the ongoing work he and his officials have done. I have experienced that work in my constituency.

It is disappointing that the advanced manufacturing and engineering services working group will begin its first meeting with firefighting. I hope that the Minister will assure us that those businesses will be listened to, and that the working group will be more than just a talking shop. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to make the House aware of the outcome of that first meeting. Will he communicate with those affected at FG Wilson about any actions stemming from the working group that might help them?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give Mrs Overend an assurance that the discussions of the working group will be transparent, and we will give ongoing reports of its activities. I do not accept her comments about firefighting. A strategic decision was taken to set up the working group. Indeed, we still have almost 90 days before the redundancies come into effect during which we can take immediate steps to address the situation.

These working groups are certainly not PR exercises or window dressing. The engineering working group follows a path tried and tested over the past year, during which we have set up two other industry-specific working groups on ICT and the agrifood industry. Two action plans for those respective sectors have already been agreed and published and are being actioned. I am keeping a close eye on the delivery of the various action points, and I am happy to answer to those in due course. I expect that the engineering working group will follow that tried and tested pattern and produce its own action plan in the very near future, hopefully within less than six months. Beyond what has happened with FG Wilson, we have an inherent strength in advanced engineering, and it is important that we capitalise on that and drive out any skills shortages and mismatches to ensure that we can fully capitalise on opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Mr Kinahan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Many of the employees of FG Wilson are in Ballyclare and Newtownabbey, in the South Antrim patch. One of the difficulties

over employing is employability. Here we have a need. I wonder whether the Minister is looking at what extra skills are needed to make those same people employable worldwide. Are we listening to companies from outside as to what they need to do so that they can go away and use their skills worldwide and come back and, maybe, create more employment for us here?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, we recognise that this is not just an issue for east Antrim or west Belfast. Workers come from a whole range of constituencies. Indeed, market forces do not simply start and finish at the arbitrary boundaries of Assembly constituencies. I expect that the workers in FG Wilson will already have very strong employability skills, that is, the ability to actually work in a workplace. They will also have strong essential skills, and most of them will have very strong technical skills. The only real issue probably relates to what needs to be done to update, refresh and add on new technical skills to meet different specific needs that different businesses may have. I would like to think that we will be looking to find alternative employment within Northern Ireland. The days of the brain drain need to be over, and we have to reverse that. The challenge for the Executive is to ensure that we create new opportunities in Northern Ireland to place workers who have, unfortunately, lost their jobs.

Mr Allister: When in nominal opposition, the Minister, as Alliance spokesman, had this to say:

"The Executive needs to move away from its cheap populism and reinvest resources in the economy. Our Executive has not taken the bold initiatives that have characterised the fiscal stimuli in other jurisdictions."

and:

"The Executive has not taken the opportunity to re-balance and modernise the local economy."

Has anything changed since he became a gamekeeper, or are we still going backwards with the second-highest unemployment for 29 consecutive months for most of which he was the Minister?

Dr Farry: I am pleased that the Member has the opportunity to do some frivolous research at a time when we need to focus on the task in hand. I am part of a collective Executive. I am satisfied that we have a robust Programme for

Government that places the economy at its heart. I believe that we have a very good economic strategy that places skills as a clear theme within that. Unemployment in Northern Ireland has been rising over the past five years, which reflects the global economic downturn. What has happened in Northern Ireland, in terms of the broad change in employment figures, is no different to other regions of the UK, the Republic of Ireland, other parts of the European Union or North America. Within that, however, we will have our own particular aspects, and that is where the Executive can make a real difference. People should be in no doubt whatsoever: we, as an Executive, are committed to doing everything in our power. Let us bear in mind that we are a devolved region, which brings opportunities to do things that the UK Government would not do or would not care about doing. However, it also has its limitations, and corporation tax is one of those, but we will not be found wanting in using every lever and pressing every button at our disposal to address the economic situation in Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

Mr Agnew: The Minister made reference to some pretty impressive figures for job creation by 2020, were corporation tax to be reduced. I do not often agree with the Finance Minister, nor he with me, but in a previous discussion on the issue he made comments to the effect that 20-year economic modelling in the current economic circumstances, given the fluctuations in Europe and further afield, was unreliable at best. Does the Minister accept that the figures that he has presented today are, at best, "guessonomics" or, even, "wishonomics", and that they are certainly not sound economic projections?

Dr Farry: I certainly agree with Mr Agnew that he is finding a range of strange company these days in some of the arguments that he is making. The report that I referenced sets out the job opportunities arising from a lower level of corporation tax through to 2030. It was produced by Oxford Economics, which is a well-renowned consultancy company. I have certainly no doubt about the reliability of the report that it has made. It is not something that was politically skewed or fixed in some way. We asked Oxford Economics to do a piece of work, and it came back with the results. The reason why we have to do those types of studies looking ahead to the number of jobs to be created is so that we can ensure that we properly plan for the future, because we are asking people to invest in particular subjects

and to plan careers for the future. It is important, therefore, that we try to anticipate what aspects of the economy are likely to grow most rapidly and where those jobs are going to be created. That enables us to ensure that we match supply and demand and place the right emphasis on skills to meet the likely new companies and areas of investment. If we do not, we will have skills shortages, skills mismatches and inefficiency in our economy. I do not think that anyone wants that.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement, which, I am sure, he found quite difficult to make. Twelve years ago, I was a member of the Harland and Wolff task force. I have every sympathy with the people who lost their jobs and with their families. Looking back, I remember that we helped people with issues regarding redundancy, benefits and a whole range of things. One of the key issues at that time was that LEDU helped people who wanted to become self-employed or set up their own business. Do you have any plans to work with other agencies to ensure that we try to create a bit of enterprise for some of the most highly skilled workers in the United Kingdom?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Douglas for his comments. As the nature of manufacturing in Northern Ireland has changed, this, unfortunately, is a well-trodden path in some respects, and we have been down this road before. We will certainly look very closely to see if self-employment is an option for some people. That is why it is important that my Department and, in particular, the redundancy advisory service, partners other agencies in exploring self-employment options, and I include DETI very much in that regard. The points he makes will be encompassed within the service that we provide through the redundancy advisory service.

I am very keen to avoid a situation in which the people affected will have to go to a multitude of people to get advice. That makes things even more stressful for people who are already in an incredibly stressful situation. It would also mean that we would have a duplication in how government is responding, which would mean we are acting inefficiently. The more that we can channel people through a one-stop shop, the better we all will be.

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make the following statement on the fourteenth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Wednesday 18 July 2012. This has been the earliest opportunity to make the statement to the Assembly following the summer recess.

Minister Michelle O'Neill and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James Reilly TD, Minister for Health, and Frances Fitzgerald TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The meeting was chaired by Minister Reilly. The statement has been agreed with Minister O'Neill, and I am making it on behalf of both of us.

Ministers received a presentation from Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT). It was delivered by Tom Daly and Bernie McCrory, director general and chief officer of CAWT, respectively, and Mairead McAlinden, chief executive of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. We noted the launch of the CAWT 2011 annual report and congratulated CAWT on its work over the past 20 years to improve the health and well-being of border populations. We also welcomed progress made in the implementation of the CAWT-managed €30 million EU INTERREG IVa Putting Patients, Clients and Families First project. More than 20,000 patients and clients have benefited from this project, which has resulted in improved patient welfare and the delivery of savings to the two Health Departments. The participation of CAWT in the Northern Periphery Programme was also welcomed.

In the health promotion field, Ministers noted the development of strategies in both jurisdictions on alcohol misuse. Those include ongoing collaboration on minimum unit price for alcohol and proposals for a North/South alcohol forum. We also noted the measures proposed in the new Northern Ireland ten-year tobacco strategy, which aims to reduce the availability and appeal of tobacco products to young people, and proposed legislation prohibiting smoking in cars where children are present is being developed in Ireland.

Ministers discussed the progress made by the special action group on obesity in Ireland, and

we noted that the Caloriewise scheme, which aims to encourage consumers to make more informed choices when eating out or on the go, is being trialled by eight local businesses in Northern Ireland.

Ministers noted that the business planning process is well advanced for the establishment of a radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin and that construction remains on target to commence in 2013, with a view to the unit being operational by 2016. Officials are working together to finalise arrangements that will ensure effective delivery of the project.

We discussed progress on the implementation of the revised memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the Ireland-Northern Ireland-National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium and noted that joint research projects undertaken through the previous MOU have indicated improved strategies for cancer prevention or treatment. Progress on the development of new collaborative health research projects through the US-Ireland research and development partnership was also noted.

In relation to suicide prevention, Ministers welcomed the publication of the refreshed Protect Life strategy in Northern Ireland and noted progress on the review of the Reach Out suicide prevention strategy in Ireland.

We also welcomed the commencement of the Men's Health Forum pilot projects, one of which will focus on the Colin area in Belfast, which has previously suffered from high levels of young male suicide, and the second of which leverages social media to reach out to young men in Ireland.

Ministers noted that the registry of self-harm is now in place in all hospital trusts in Northern Ireland, which means that there is complete coverage across the island of Ireland. We endorsed revised all-island media guidelines, which seek to promote positive reporting of suicide, and welcomed the Please Talk campaign, which links students who are in distress with college supports, and which is operational in campuses in both jurisdictions.

Ministers noted and welcomed the proposed future work programme for the child protection steering group, which is to be taken forward through five specific work streams focusing on: knowledge exchange; quality and effectiveness; deaths of children in care; cultural competence in safeguarding; and specialist services.

Turning to the food safety sector, the Council received a presentation on the work of Safefood

from the CEO, Martin Higgins. The report highlighted scientific and promotional activities, as well as the success of the Safefood obesity awareness campaign Stop the Spread, which won the gold award in the healthcare sector at the 2012 An Post Integrated Direct Marketing Awards. Ministers reviewed progress on the development of the Safefood business plan and budget 2012, and noted the Safefood 2011 annual report and accounts.

The publication of the Safefood report entitled 'Infectious Intestinal Diseases on the Island of Ireland 2000-2010' was welcomed, and Ministers acknowledged Safefood's ongoing work on infectious intestinal diseases. They noted that the report and ongoing studies of trends advance the epidemiological understanding of food-borne diseases and help to underpin future prevention strategies for Safefood.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the update on the NSMC.

Minister, you mentioned that there was a presentation and update from CAWT. Will you tell us whether all-island paediatric cardiac care was discussed or mentioned at the meeting? Will you give us more information and detail on how the child protection steering group will tie in with the Safeguarding Board, which you are due to launch, I think, tomorrow or Wednesday?

Mr Poots: I had a separate meeting with Dr Reilly at which we discussed paediatric cardiac care. We are working closely together to try to achieve a positive outcome. The House knows — Members will have received a lot of letters about the issue from constituents — that there is a huge amount of anxiety that paediatric care may not be available to the public here without the need to fly to England. We certainly want to avoid that if at all possible. We need to achieve a number of things. A clear demonstration is needed that the results in the Republic of Ireland back up the work there. My suspicion is that the quality of care is good, but we do not have the evidence to support that. We are getting evidence that will support that, which will help us to move forward. I think that we are getting feedback on the outcome of operations that have taken place over the past three years. It would be very useful if we could come to an agreed outcome with the Republic of Ireland.

The child protection officials group will share information with the Safeguarding Board for

Northern Ireland (SBNI) on the work being undertaken in the new work programme and each of the five specific areas of focus. It will invite the SBNI to contribute directly to the work of the five subgroups as appropriate. It will also consider any representations and suggestions made by the SBNI with a view to improving practice in Northern Ireland and cross-border. The officials group also intends to host an all-Ireland conference with a focus on knowledge exchange in child protection between the two jurisdictions. The conference will afford the SBNI and the newly established child protection agency in the Republic of Ireland the opportunity to reach a wider audience of policymakers, practitioners and managers in child protection services and to develop working relationships with service delivery systems. I do not believe that any border or stretch of water should be a mechanism that allows paedophiles to engage in their activities without the rigours of the law being applied to them. It is incumbent on us to do everything that we can to ensure that paedophiles are brought to justice.

Mr Wells: Minister, in a recent article in the media, the Chief Medical Officer highlighted the problems of alcohol and drug addiction and the huge burden that that places on our health service. I was interested to hear that he raised both issues during a recent meeting. What can be done to break the vicious cycle of addiction that has such a profound impact on those who are hooked and to address the burden that it places on the health service generally?

Mr Poots: Research shows that the misuse of alcohol in Northern Ireland costs up to £900 million every year, and around £250 million of those costs are borne by the health and social care sector. I do not think that it is reasonable that we should accept that. People are doing themselves an awful lot of harm, particularly through binge drinking, and steps need to be taken to discourage it.

I welcome the fact that we are having discussions with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Scotland about the potential to raise the minimum price of alcohol. I also welcome the fact that in more recent days, David Cameron, who appeared at one stage to be totally opposed to minimum pricing, has done an about-turn and now appears to be quite supportive of the idea. Having a minimum price for alcohol across the British Isles is considerably easier to enforce than it would be if just Scotland or Northern Ireland were doing it.

2.15 pm

It is also quite beneficial that Scotland is ahead of us on the issue, because all the judicial reviews out of which lawyers' and QCs' income can get fatter will be borne by Scotland rather than Northern Ireland. That makes a change, so I am glad that the fat cat lawyers in Scotland will be able to get their income. However, the fat cat lawyers in Northern Ireland will not be able to squeeze it out of us, because we will be able to take the evidence from Scotland.

Mr Beggs: The paediatric cardiology proposals are an issue of great concern to many constituents. Many years ago, I had to spend a couple of nights in hospital to comfort a young son prior to an operation. Why was the North/South sectoral meeting on health not deemed to be an appropriate occasion at which to raise the subject and try to come up with a satisfactory solution, and why did the Minister adopt a different forum for doing so?

Mr Poots: The meeting took place on 18 July, and I think that the report was received in August, so that would be one reason. However, we were aware that work for the report was taking place, so that is why it was deemed important enough to have a conversation.

We cannot easily ignore a report from experts who say that what is currently available in Belfast is unsustainable. It would be foolhardy simply to say that we are going ahead and ignoring the report. At the same time, I think carefully about a mother who has just given birth by caesarian section to a baby who needs surgery immediately. That baby has to be flown to England to get that surgery, and the mother cannot be flown to England. Perhaps the baby loses its life while in England, and the mother is not there at that very important time.

Although the vast majority of children would receive the best possible care, at some point those things would happen, so we need to reflect on those things. This is a very important clinical decision but not a clinical decision alone. It is also about people's personal circumstances. Therefore, it is important for us to seek to ensure that we maximise the clinical excellence in the care that is provided and, hopefully, try to do that somewhere here on the island of Ireland, and preferably keep some sort of service in Belfast if that is at all possible. I do not know whether that is possible, but we need to test everything over the next number of months to see how we can maximise the service that is provided locally.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's remarks on paediatric cardiac services. Given what we have learnt over the summer about the threat to paediatric cardiac services in our region, is it not time perhaps to think about scoping out with Dr James Reilly in the Republic those other areas of specialist medical services that could be sustainable on an all-island basis and that may well be under threat if we continue to look at them simply in a regional context?

Mr Poots: There are two issues. There will be services that are available only whenever you have a population threshold. If it suits us to do that with the Republic of Ireland, I am very happy to do that. If it suits us to do it with the north-west of England or with Scotland, I am happy to do that as well. We need to be outward-looking to ensure that we have the best possible healthcare.

We also have the regional issues, where, for example, the option for people in Donegal is to travel long distances, but perhaps we can provide them with a better service at Altnagelvin or, indeed, the new hospital at Enniskillen. The same may apply to counties such as Monaghan and Cavan, and so forth. Therefore, we need to have a conversation on what services we in Northern Ireland can provide to people from the Republic of Ireland, and vice versa. That is not a conversation that I will run away from. I do not believe that it is a political issue; I think that it is a health issue. It would be very sad, particularly for the people of Fermanagh, who have an excellent new hospital, to open a hospital of that quality but not ensure that its services can be sustained. So, by bringing more numbers and a wider population into a facility like that, we can ensure that the entire population of County Fermanagh and the south-west of Northern Ireland can have the best possible services locally and will not have to travel to Belfast, Altnagelvin or elsewhere as a result of services having been removed.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement this afternoon. I also congratulate Cooperation and Working Together for its excellent work and leadership over some 20 years. In his statement, the Minister acknowledged that CAWT is undertaking a €30 million project that has helped some 20,000 patients. Given that that €30 million will undoubtedly run out, will the Minister tell the House whether he is aware of any further or follow-up investment being made available so that we can help many more patients across the island?

Mr Poots: We are identifying where other programme funds could come from for CAWT and its work. For example, CAWT was invited to become a partner of an INTERREG IVa health committee with partners in Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and Canada. That project, which is called Recruit and Retain, will be managed by CAWT and will, for example, set out to find solutions to the persistent difficulties of recruiting and retaining high-quality public sector workers in remote areas of northern Europe. So, we need to look at how we can identify resources to do that.

We are also looking at making savings in both health Departments, and, in and of themselves, INTERREG IVa projects represent significant savings for the Departments and health agencies in each jurisdiction. To date, more than 21,000 patients and clients have received services that would otherwise have required funding from respective systems. In many cases, patients and clients were waiting for services for up to four years. For example, in the Cavan/Monaghan Hospital Group in the HSE, children were waiting for more than three years for audiology services. However, as a result of a CAWT project, no child or, indeed, adult will wait any longer than nine months for a first appointment, and, for urgent cases, no one will wait any longer than two weeks. The cumulative savings that are made at the end of that measure should equate to the cost of services or treatment for at least 30,000 patients. So, we need to be clever about how we do things and, where we can, we need to work together and identify savings. I think that it is incumbent on us to do that and to create savings that can be reinvested in the health and social care system.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, in your statement you referred to the Men's Health Forum and to a pilot project in the Colin area of west Belfast. Will you give us some more detail on what that project involves?

Mr Poots: Men's health has, of course, not been as well looked after as women's health, and we are in a situation where men live for considerably shorter periods than women. So, we want to encourage men to look after themselves better. Some people might suggest that that happens because men have tougher lives than the ladies, but I would not dare to make such a suggestion. I encourage men to take greater care of themselves and to ensure that they eat properly and do all those types of things.

There has been a trial in the Colin area, which has, obviously, experienced a cluster of suicides. The project there works with young men and incorporates support, mentoring, reflection and practical action. We have learned from that project, and I think that there is much that we can take from it when implementing and rolling out other programmes.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement. In light of the Minister's discussions regarding progress made by the Special Action Group on Obesity in Ireland, will the Minister tell us what has been done to tackle obesity?

Mr Poots: We do have a problem with obesity, because — I will repeat it again — 59% of us have been measured as overweight or obese, with 36% overweight and 23% obese. In relation to children aged two to 15, 27% were assessed as overweight or obese, with 19% overweight and 8% obese. That is obviously something that we need to work on. The Department has developed a framework for preventing and addressing overweight and obesity, 'A Fitter Future for All'. It was launched in March 2012 and implementation is now being taken forward by the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency. The framework recognises the complex nature of obesity and will address the issues through a co-ordinated, integrated, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral approach. It contains a range of outcomes designed to create an environment that will support and promote a physically active lifestyle and healthy diet, which will benefit long-term health.

One of the key challenges in overweight and obesity prevention is bringing about a behavioural change in individuals through all life course stages and settings, and the framework aims to empower the population to adopt a healthier lifestyle. My Department cannot do it on its own. We need the other Departments such as the Department of Education, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to work very closely together to develop, for example, the use of school sports fields at night by the public and to encourage more people to engage in sporting activities.

What I am encouraging the public to do, I also encourage Members of the Assembly to do, because I think that if we carried out a test on whether 59% of Members of the House were overweight or obese, it might reflect the situation with the public.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, can you reassure the

people of Derry, Strabane, Donegal and the wider area that the planned radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is on target for 2013? At what stage is the delivery of the project?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to be brief because Question Time is at 2.30 pm.

Mr Poots: OK. The business planning process for the establishment of a radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is well advanced. It has taken full account of the capacity needed to accommodate Donegal patients. Construction will commence in 2013 with an operational date in 2016, so we are still on time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt questions on the statement, but, as Question Time is due to start at 2.30 pm, I ask the House to take its ease for a moment. We will return to the health statement after Question Time, when Paula Bradley will be called to ask a question.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Sexual Orientation Strategy

1. **Ms Ruane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to re-establish the sexual orientation working group to discuss the development of the draft sexual orientation strategy. (AQO 2412/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We have no plans to re-establish the sexual orientation working group. However, we will continue to liaise with the sector regarding the development of the sexual orientation strategy that we are committed to producing before the end of 2012.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the junior Minister for his answer, but I would like to know whether he will confirm, as previously stated, that the sexual orientation strategy will be published by December 2012.

Mr Bell: We are working to ensure that the draft is put out for public consultation by the end of this year, which is a confirmation to have that draft ready and out for consultation by the end of 2012.

Mr Buchanan: Can the junior Minister confirm to the House that there are no plans to change the definition of marriage here in Northern Ireland?

Mr Bell: I can confirm that there are no plans to change the definition of marriage in Northern Ireland. To do so, as Members know, would require the agreement of the Executive, and parties on the Executive are hopelessly divided in reaching a position on that. The DUP is very clear that it sees gay marriage as an oxymoron; it sees marriage as being between a man and a woman. The Alliance Party and Sinn Féin are united in their support for gay marriage, and, if you want to hear both sides of the argument,

you can ask Mike Nesbitt or Alasdair McDonnell, because, depending on which of their MLAs you speak to, one will agree and another will not.

Mr McDevitt: It is always illuminating to come here and listen to the Minister give his opinion on other parties' business. Can I ask him about his own business as a Minister, if that is in order, Mr Speaker? Does he believe that the delay that there has been in the production of a sexual orientation strategy is acceptable? Will he give a commitment to the House that it will absolutely, definitively be published by the end of this year?

Mr Bell: I note that the SDLP's Member for South Belfast did not tell us which SDLP side he was on. I suspect that his party remains hopelessly divided on the issue. I do not know whether he is a pro or an anti.

I have been clear, since the very first time that I spoke about the sexual orientation strategy from this Dispatch Box, that we would seek to have the draft strategy out for public consultation by the end of this year. That is the timeline we have set our officials, and that is the timeline we are working to.

Mr Agnew: Will the issue of homophobic bullying in schools be tackled in the sexual orientation strategy, as well as the issue of teachers expressing their personal opinion on sexual orientation?

Mr Bell: I do not want to give the strategy out before it has been drafted, but let me be absolutely clear in respect of any form of bullying, whether it is on the basis of someone's sexual orientation, the colour of their skin, their ethnic minority status or their gender — all of that bullying — that we do not need to wait for a strategy for it: it is unacceptable, it is unlawful, and it should not be tolerated by any party in the House.

Corporation Tax: Joint Ministerial Working Group

2. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the joint ministerial working group on corporation tax. (AQO 2413/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: A reduction in the rate of corporation tax would provide a major stimulus to the local economy. One of the key commitments in our Programme for Government is to press for the devolution of

corporation tax-setting powers and to reduce its level. The joint ministerial working group examining the issues involved in devolving responsibility for the rate of corporation tax to the Executive has met on three occasions, most recently on 25 June. Although some good progress has been made, a number of critical issues remain outstanding. In particular, we are concerned that the approach being proposed by the Treasury would result in the cost of a rate reduction being prohibitively expensive. Cost is a very important issue, and this needs to be affordable if it is to work.

We still need to agree some issues in respect of the proposed approach to the block grant adjustment. The working group will meet again in London on 18 October, with a view to resolving the outstanding issues. The United Kingdom Government will then decide on whether the Executive should be offered the opportunity to take responsibility for corporation tax setting.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister outline what mitigating measures could be taken to offset the cost of a reduced rate of corporation tax?

Mr P Robinson: I assume that the question relates to mitigating the impact on the block grant, and, of course, several steps can be taken. You can determine the level to which you reduce corporation tax: 12.5% is, I believe, equivalent to the rate in the Republic of Ireland, but it does not have to be the level that we move to. Subject to European law, you can look at what services you can align with a lower level of corporation tax, or, indeed, you can determine at what level you have a lower rate of corporation tax. So, you could have several levels of corporation tax. There is a series of steps that you can take. The cleanest and by far the best way is to have, as soon as is possible, a lower level of corporation tax that makes us competitive. Most of our competition is not with the rest of the United Kingdom but with the rest of this island.

Mr Douglas: The Finance Minister indicated that the cost to the block grant of devolving corporation tax could be as much as £700 million. Does the First Minister agree with me that any devolution of corporation tax should be agreed at a price that we can afford?

Mr P Robinson: I certainly agree. In indicating that the cost could be as much as £700 million, the Finance Minister was, I think, indicating that it is important that the mechanism that is used to determine future corporation tax levels from

Northern Ireland is affordable. At the moment, the Treasury's favoured option would ratchet up the level over time. So, it could be £700 million in 15 years' time. Obviously, you want to have a system that does not mean we have to double our level of corporation tax vis-à-vis the rest of the United Kingdom in order to have the benefits arising from it. It is important that it is affordable. It is also important that the level of corporation tax taken from the block grant does not impinge on our ability to provide front line services. So, it is important that it is at a level that is affordable, but I still believe that it is the one key element of rebalancing our economy that is, as yet, untried. Certainly, the Government, who have indicated that they are committed to rebalancing the economy, have suggested no other alternative.

Mrs Overend: I thank the First Minister for his answers, and I welcome the ongoing negotiations, which are vital to the Northern Ireland economy. As part of those negotiations, have the Executive looked at the option of devolving corporation tax for the small profits rate, or are they sticking to one plan and one plan only for the overall corporation tax? I agree that that is the best option, but do we need to look at a plan B?

Mr P Robinson: First, I am not exactly sure that I would use the term "negotiation" when dealing with the Treasury. We have a working group that is looking at what legislative changes would be required and how it would be done in Northern Ireland were the matter to be devolved. Those are fairly technical issues, and I do not see there being a difficulty with either of those matters. The one area that is outstanding is the impact on the block grant. In answering the initial question, I indicated that there are several ways that you can look at reducing the impact on the block grant, one of which is to look at differential levels of corporation tax for various levels of profit. Those are decisions that the Executive will not and cannot take until they see the proposal from the United Kingdom Government and the impact it will have on the block grant. It is something that we can look at, but it would not be our first option.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. What is his assessment of whether the newly appointed Secretary of State has the same enthusiasm for the reduction in corporation tax as the outgoing Secretary of State? In your opinion, will she increase or decrease the momentum that has been built up behind the demand for the reduction in corporation tax?

Mr P Robinson: I very much welcome the meeting that I had with the new Secretary of State and her commitment to following on with the role of recognising that the ability of the devolved Administration to set levels of corporation tax was a positive step. She recognises that there are outstanding matters that have to be resolved. As for a comparison, the outgoing Secretary of State was able to demonstrate his commitment over a long time and in many different ways, whereas the present Secretary of State has not had the opportunity to do so. I suppose that, when we have our next ministerial meeting, we will find out for certain which corner the new Secretary of State is fighting in, whether she is with the Treasury or the Northern Ireland Executive.

Parades

3. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the importance of mutual respect and tolerance in resolving the issue of disputed parades and counterprotests. (AQO 2414/11-15)

4. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact on community relations as a result of the republican parade and paramilitary displays in Dungiven on 5 August 2012. (AQO 2415/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 4 together.

We are convinced that the principles of mutual respect and tolerance are key to resolving the issue of disputed parades and counterparades. The presumption of both the right to assembly and the right to express cultural identity is at the heart of the proposals agreed at Hillsborough on parades and protests. However, that was within the context that such demonstrations of cultural identity should be carried out responsibly. Likewise, the principle of tolerance is at the centre of both the proposed parades and protest legislation and the good relations strategy that we will publish shortly.

In relation to measuring community relations impacts, there is no robust or accurate way for the Department to assess this in the time frame outlined in the question. However, we are all well aware of the potential detrimental impact of certain events or activities within the community, especially if those include activities that glorify terrorism.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Over the summer, I had the privilege

— if that is what it was — to visit the Parades Commission four times. Clearly, the commission's determinations demonstrate that it is discredited, out of touch and part of the problem, not the solution. Does the First Minister agree that there is real anger in the unionist community about the way in which the loyal orders are treated and the way in which the republican community is treated, for example at Whitewell in north Belfast and Dungiven in County Londonderry?

Mr P Robinson: It is worth saying that I have heard complaints about the Parades Commission from all sections of our community. Clearly, people have been unhappy with decisions that have been taken. At the same time, we recognise that there is a need for a mechanism to deal with parades, particularly where there is some dispute about them. The deputy First Minister and I and our colleagues put forward proposals arising from the Hillsborough Castle discussions. Those proposals are still on the shelf. If any organisation or individual wishes to put forward an alternative proposal or wishes to see whether agreement could be reached on some amendment to those proposals, we would very much welcome that. However, we are committed to lifting that issue off the shelf to see whether we can get community agreement. It is essential that we get a way forward that has support across the community.

Coming from the unionist community, I accept that there is a strong feeling that there is some inequality in the way in which parades are dealt with, not just by the Parades Commission. The Member mentioned Dungiven. I was appalled to learn that the police had reached an agreement with the people who organised the event that the police would stay out of Dungiven. The police should not abdicate responsibility for any area in Northern Ireland. I hope that colleagues on the Policing Board will take that matter up with the Chief Constable.

2.45 pm

Mr Allister: Is the First Minister so beholden to Sinn Féin that he cannot, today in the House, condemn his deputy for fronting the terror-fest in Dungiven, where terrorism was glorified by individuals dressed as IRA terrorists and sporting what were said to be Armalites and republican bands stopped to play rebel music outside a Church of Ireland place of worship? Will the First Minister now condemn his deputy for fronting such an occasion?

Mr P Robinson: I have already said that respect and tolerance are the whole basis on which we will successfully take forward the parades issue. On the Sinn Féin website, I noticed a broadcast of the events at Dungiven lasting, I think, about 17 minutes. I cannot see that it can be wrong for music to be played outside a Catholic church and right for music to be played outside a Protestant church. The organisers of that parade must recognise that their impact on community relations is not only directly in that area but on wider community relations throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: That shelf of shelved strategies and documents must be getting pretty heavy these days.

Regardless of one's personal view on the Parades Commission, will the First Minister make it clear that it is incumbent on every member of a democratic society to respect the rule of law?

Mr P Robinson: It is a bit rich for somebody who walked away from taking decisions on matters to lecture anybody on decisions that are on a shelf.

All of us in the House should believe that respect for the law must be upheld and encourage everybody else to do so.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister confirm that, as far as he and the deputy First Minister are concerned, dialogue that seeks to ensure local solutions is an essential requirement when dealing with contentious parades?

Mr P Robinson: I think that everybody knows that the proposals arising from Hillsborough, which the deputy First Minister and I put forward, indicated the benefit that could be derived from reaching agreements through dialogue. However, at the same time, we put in place mechanisms by which, when it was not possible to have such dialogue, disputes could be resolved. Obviously, if it is possible to have dialogue at a local level and the dispute can be resolved at that level, that is best. If not, we clearly need a mechanism for taking a decision, and that also requires us, unlike the Parades Commission, to have a forum in which people can state their case, know what others are saying to the commission and be able to counter anything that they believe to be inaccurate.

Mr Swann: I want to clarify something with the First Minister. The original agreement after

Hillsborough was between the DUP and Sinn Féin. The First Minister talked about dialogue. Has been any dialogue between either the DUP or Sinn Féin and the groups who objected to that original agreement on whether they could produce an alternative?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure to whom the Member refers when he talks about the groups who disagreed. The main group that disagreed was Grand Lodge. Of course, the Orange had a representative on the working group and was aware of and, indeed, had agreed to the move that we were making. So the proposal would not have surprised any of the leadership of the Orange Institution. If Grand Lodge found it unacceptable, I would very much welcome conversations with its representatives about how the proposal could be improved or about another proposal capable of getting support across the community. Equally, we are open to hearing the views of political parties in the Assembly, and, shortly, the deputy First Minister and I will outline a mechanism by which this can be done.

Mr McClarty: Do the First Minister and deputy First Minister have any plans to liaise with the organisers of all disputed parades, whether republican or loyalist, to sort out future issues?

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I released a statement in which we indicated that we were looking at three particular aspects arising from the difficulties in north Belfast. One was to encourage an end to the immediate violence that had occurred; the second was to attempt to encourage a resolution on the parade at the end of this month; and a third was to look at long-term proposals to deal with parades more generally. We have already committed ourselves to doing that, so we will not restrict those who should want to contribute to it. All those who have an interest — all stakeholders — will be able to make a contribution. It is hoped that if we can get all-party support for proposals, that will strengthen the proposals considerably. We will look at that aspect.

Mr A Maginness: Given the forthcoming Ulster covenant parade on 29 September, is it not incumbent on all political leaders and parties, the loyal orders and those in the community to support the rule of law? That includes the Executive, particularly the Minister for Social Development. Does the First Minister agree that that is the very least that one should expect from a Minister?

Mr P Robinson: I am always pleased that all my party's Ministers fully support the rule of law. I always find it interesting to hear the SDLP condemn those who are not prepared to attack civil disobedience, considering that the SDLP was formed out of and advocated civil disobedience. Now, it has become holier than thou and points the finger in every other direction. That party should remember that, when it points the finger at the Social Development Minister, there are three fingers pointing back at it.

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission: 'Is that right?'

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission document 'Is that right?'. (AQO 2416/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission published a document titled 'Is that right? Fact and Fiction on a Bill of Rights' on 6 September 2012. We understand that its purpose is to stimulate discussion on a bill of rights. As Members will be aware, responsibility for a bill of rights lies with the United Kingdom Government.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCéad-Aire as ucht a fhreagra, ach tá ceist bheag agam air go fóill.

What steps are the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister taking to ensure that a bill of rights is placed firmly back on the agenda here?

Mr P Robinson: The role of determining whether there should be a bill of rights of course lies with the United Kingdom Government. Our responsibility is to ensure that the bill of rights requirements of the Act of Parliament and the European convention are upheld by all Departments. We will continue to do that. The Member will be aware that perhaps every party in the Chamber holds different views on the worthiness of a bill of rights. In many ways, the previous Human Rights Commission damaged the cause of a Northern Ireland bill of rights by extending and expanding it in the way that it did. Many of us, even on this side of the House, could have contemplated a bill of rights at a high level. However, when we started to get down into social and economic policy, it became much more problematical.

Mr Weir: What responsibility does a public body such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission have to bring forward a balanced document to inform a debate on human rights, rather than one that simply promotes a particular agenda?

Mr P Robinson: If you look at the document provided by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, you will see that it does not pretend to be a balanced document. It is certainly not a balanced document. To some extent, I think that the present commission is attempting to reframe the argument because of the damage caused by the previous commission. However, the document does not give a balanced view for and against a bill of rights. It puts up straw men so that it can knock down a number of the arguments that have been made. If the Human Rights Commission strongly believes that there should be a bill of rights, there is no reason why it cannot express that view, but it certainly should not be taken by anybody as a balanced, impartial or independent view of the subject.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. Given that OFMDFM has the lead responsibility for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, will the First Minister assure the Assembly that the Programme for Government commitment to extend age discrimination legislation will also apply to children and young people?

Mr P Robinson: No matter what element of the policy the office has, any human rights requirement is a matter that Ministers will have to take into account when they deal with policy matters, whether they relate to children, disabled people or older people.

Mr McCarthy: Has the First Minister or his Department had any conversations with the UK Government and, in particular, their representative here, the Secretary of State, on this very important issue?

Mr P Robinson: I certainly discussed it with the previous Secretary of State. I have had only one meeting with the new Secretary of State, so it has not been discussed as yet with her. There have been a number of letters, pieces of correspondence and discussion with the United Kingdom Government on the issue more generally. It was the Secretary of State's clear view — I think that this was shared by the Cabinet — that they were cold on the idea of a UK bill of rights and would not move on a Northern Ireland bill of rights unless this Assembly asked them to.

Institutional Child Abuse

Ms McCorley: Ceist uimhir a sé, le do thoil.

Mr Speaker: Can the Member translate?

Ms McCorley: Question 6, please.

6. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the historical institutional abuse inquiry. (AQO 2417/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Oh, right. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell: I am pleased to say that, since the House was last updated, significant progress has been made towards the inquiry's establishment. The inquiry's chairman, Sir Anthony Hart, and his team have been fully engaged in preparatory work to develop the structures and protocols under which the inquiry will operate. We are now very close to the point where the inquiry will launch its registration scheme. That will allow those who suffered in institutions as children to register to have their experiences heard by the acknowledgement forum. We are reaching an important milestone in the inquiry's life, and I know that it will also be a significant moment for victims and survivors. The Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill continues its legislative passage and is currently under the scrutiny of the OFMDFM Committee. We are totally committed to providing all the support that the Committee needs so that we can move forward without further delay. Through conversations with victims and survivors, I understand that, for many, the inquiry will be the culmination of a lifetime's struggle. I take this opportunity to say that their interests remain our top priority.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the junior Minister for his answers up to now. Will he confirm that, in establishing the inquiry into historical institutional abuse, there is no intention to consider or treat those who were victims of abuse that occurred outside the terms of the inquiry as in any way second-class, as some may fear?

Mr Bell: No. There is absolutely no intention to do that, nor would I allow it to happen. Every working day, for 21 years of my life, I worked in social services with victims of child sexual abuse. Sadly, I had to deal with hundreds of

children and adults. Let us be very clear: there is a clear protocol, and criminal investigations and criminal compensation payments will continue. This is not an either/or.

The inquiry was established specifically because there were many people who could not go home to a mum or a dad, a stepmum or a stepdad or other caregiver where abuse occurred.

I acknowledge that abuse often occurred in the home. However, people in residential and state care could not go outside the environment where the abuse occurred; they had no one to go to. That is the specific reason why the historical institutional abuse inquiry is dealing directly with those people. There is no intention to make any differentiation. The legal and criminal procedures go on regardless. We are looking at those who were in residential care because, quite frankly, those boys and girls had nowhere else to go.

3.00 pm

Regional Development

Railways: Ballykelly

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the announcement on the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development headquarters, whether the option of providing a railway halt or station at Ballykelly will be examined. (AQO 2427/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): At the outset, I join ministerial colleagues and Members in extending my profound sympathy to the Spence family on the tragic loss of Noel, Graham and Nevin. I trust that the family circle and wider friends will all know God's blessing as they try to come to terms with their enormous loss.

My Department has not received any approaches from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) for a new rail link to its proposed new headquarters at Ballykelly. For such an option to be considered, a business case would be required to test its commercial viability and funding would need to be found. In the current Budget, no funding is available for my Department for a station or halt at the Ballykelly site.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that a relatively minor adjustment of the plans to insert

passing loops could be made to accommodate such a halt?

Mr Kennedy: As I said in my original answer, my Department was not consulted in relation to the announcement made by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. No preliminary work has been carried out. Of course we would look at any such proposal. However, I must reiterate that there is no funding in my current budget for a station or halt at the Ballykelly site.

Mr McClarty: Will the Minister to give us an update on the ongoing work on the line between Coleraine and Londonderry?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will know that I secured the necessary funding and the approval of the Assembly and Executive to bring forward the renewals work on the Coleraine to Londonderry railway track. The project started on time in July 2012, and it will be completed in three phases. The first phase is the relaying of the ends of the section of the line and the completion of essential bridge work during the closure of the line between July 2012 and April 2013. While the line is closed, other essential track safety improvements work covering the middle section of the line will also be completed. Phase 1 of the work will cost around £27 million. The contracts have been agreed and have commenced. Work is ongoing.

The second phase, to be completed during 2015, involves resignalling works and the construction of a new passing loop. The cost of this phase is estimated at around £20 million. In order to proceed with the work, an economic appraisal was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The third phase will be the full relay of the line. That will not be completed until 2021, and, as such, the necessary Budget cover has still to be secured. Work is ongoing and progressing. I am optimistic that the line will reopen in April 2013, as scheduled.

Mr G Robinson: I believe that the Minister is aware of the interest of my colleague Gregory Campbell and myself in the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line as a whole. Given the very welcome news of the relocation of DARD's headquarters to Ballykelly, which we both lobbied for, does the Minister agree that a halt would benefit the new potential workforce and the wider local community? It would be beneficial if some money could be found and a request from the DARD Minister were forthcoming.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and his interest in this particular issue. I have clearly outlined that both me and my Department were unsighted by Minister O'Neill's announcement of the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. We have not had any conversations or correspondence, to the best of our knowledge, on the issue. If such a request is made, of course we will seek to co-operate.

Mr Dallat: I can assure the Minister that a letter on the subject is winding its way to him. Does he agree that the investment that he found for the work that is taking place on the railway — for which I thank him very much; it is great that a Newry man put the money into the north-west — coupled with the announcement from the Department of Agriculture, makes it imperative that we do not miss yet another opportunity to build rail travel into the way we move about?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's supplementary question and the compliment that he bestowed upon me.

Of course, if a request is made by Minister O'Neill to explore the possibilities, what I am clearly saying is that within my current budget, there is no provision. Also, we were unsighted when this announcement was made. I have no doubt that the Member, along with other constituency representatives, will continue to press the case for upgraded and improved rail facilities to that area.

Mr Speaker: The next question is question 2. Dolores Kelly is not in her place. From now on, Members who put down questions to Ministers but are not here to listen to the answers will be named in the Chamber.

A2: Bangor to Belfast

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Regional Development what long-term proposals are being developed to improve road safety and traffic flows on the Belfast to Bangor A2 dual carriageway. (AQO 2429/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. In respect of question 2, I had stacks of answers ready, which were really good. You are missing a treat. *[Laughter.]* The A2 Belfast to Bangor road is part of the strategic road network and carries approximately 45,000 vehicles a day. The Member will be aware that Roads Service's longer-term plans include proposals to widen the busiest section of that route — the Sydenham bypass — to three lanes in each

direction to improve capacity and reduce delays at peak times. The progression of that scheme will be subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory processes and the availability of funding, which in turn will be dependent on the outcome of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which is under consideration, and future Budget settlements.

About one quarter of the route, between Hollywood and Ballyrobert, is single four-lane carriageway. Roads Service also has long-term plans to improve a number of the junctions along that section to improve road safety.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware that, due to road safety implications at at least two of the junctions, namely Carney Hill and Larch Hill, which fall between Ballyrobert and Hollywood, planning applications for newbuild homes have been refused due to the dangerous junctions with the A2 dual carriageway?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As to whether Roads Service has any proposals to improve the Carney Hill junction, I can indicate that Roads Service has identified a potential improvement at the Carney Hill junction to provide a right-turn pocket from the Belfast direction to reduce the risk of rear-end shunts. However, that scheme is a lower priority compared with other improvements along that route and is unlikely to proceed in the foreseeable future due to the limited availability of funding.

The Member also asked about Larch Hill and the junction there. I am aware that there are difficulties for motorists getting in and out of side roads such as Larch Hill along this busy route. It is not realistic or desirable for Roads Service to install traffic signals at every junction. However, the introduction of the speed-monitoring system by the PSNI in 2008 has helped to improve driver behaviour and reduce collisions along this route. Roads Service has provided appropriate warning signs and road markings at this junction, and adjustments were made to the signal timing at the nearby Seahill junction to improve gaps for vehicles exiting Larch Hill, but Roads Service currently has no plans to make improvements to this junction.

Mr Cree: On the issue of improving traffic flows, can the Minister detail whether he will review the Roads Service proposals for Craigantlet crossroads and bring forward a scheme that avoids the Craigantlet cottages?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, his interest and that of other Members and public representatives generally on the issue of Craigantlet crossroads. The Member will know that I am well aware of the concerns of local residents about the junction improvement proposals at Craigantlet. I met community representatives recently on a number of occasions, and, indeed, I have been out on site, where he was present, to hear the concerns at first hand. The proposals are currently under consideration by the Planning Service, and we await its independent view on the acceptability of the scheme in overall planning terms. Nevertheless, on the point that he raised, I have asked officials to give serious consideration to alternative layouts that have been suggested by the local residents and which would have less impact on Craigantlet cottages. I will consider the outcome of this work before making any decision on the way forward.

Mr Agnew: Can the Minister give an assurance that the proposals for Craigantlet crossroads are not simply phase 1 of creating an alternative dual carriageway?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am not sure whether he was available to attend the meeting that was held on site. It was a very useful discussion with residents and other local representatives. We do not want to solve one problem by creating another, so the Department will look at potential alternatives. Ultimately, I will seek to find a way forward.

Water Treatment: Mid Ulster

4. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an overview of Northern Ireland Water's programme for capital investment in water treatment in the Mid Ulster constituency. (AQO 2430/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that there has and will continue to be investment in water and sewerage across the Mid Ulster constituency. Investment already completed, planned and already delivered in the Mid Ulster area totals £62 million since 2010-11, projecting forward to the end of the current Programme for Government in 2014-15. Of this investment, £26 million was directed towards water treatment and water mains, and the remainder was invested in sewage collection and wastewater treatment.

Highlights of this investment include: the completion of the Castor Bay to Dungannon

trunk main, which allowed the replacement of Altmore water treatment works and improved water quality; upgrades to the wastewater treatment works at Magherafelt, Maghera, Bush, Moygashel, Coalisland, Draperstown and Coagh; capacity increases at Carland service reservoir; upgrades to the sewerage network in Draperstown, including the upgrade of discharges to rivers and the reduction in flood risk of a number of properties; the delivery of water main upgrades across the Cookstown area; and the delivery of infrastructure to, and new connections within, developments in the constituency area.

Drinking water in the Mid Ulster constituency is supplied by three water treatment works, namely Lough Fea, Castor Bay and Moyola. Lough Fea is operated by Northern Ireland Water, while Castor Bay and Moyola are operated through a public-private partnership agreement with Dalriada Water. Northern Ireland Water is satisfied that all the works are operating effectively, and while they are subject to ongoing maintenance to sustain operational outputs, there are no current plans or need for significant capital investment at any of these works. Surely that answer is of enough merit to not require a supplementary question.

3.15 pm

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for such a lengthy answer that details his commitment to the Mid Ulster constituency, and I commend him for his efforts on that. Could he detail the overall projected capital investment in Northern Ireland over the next number of years? How will he ensure that it is most suitably targeted?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her kind comments, and I will simply say that the total investment across Northern Ireland in the five-year period is projected to be £837 million. That capital investment is targeted to achieve the maximum possible benefit for the people of Northern Ireland through engagement with a wide range of stakeholders including the Department for Regional Development, the Utility Regulator, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the Consumer Council of Northern Ireland.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the Minister's commitment to the Mid Ulster constituency through the provision of funding for capital projects. The Minister detailed a number of those, and I do not have any issue to bring to his attention. Given the good state of finances

for Mid Ulster, will the Minister continue to push for funding for any request that comes forward?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his detailed supplementary question. I am very happy to outline the progress that has been made. It shows ongoing commitment, not only on my part but on that of my Department, to continue to improve and upgrade the overall infrastructure. That is key not only in Mid Ulster but all over Northern Ireland, and I will continue to lobby and seek additional funds from Executive colleagues, particularly the Finance Minister, as we move forward because of the need to keep making progress with our water and sewerage infrastructure.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as a chuid freagraí. I have a few specific questions. The Minister may not have the detail with him today, but I ask him to look at and advise on the investment potential to enhance the capacity of the sewage disposal works in Cookstown. Likewise, I noticed recently that there seems to have been a problem at Killymuck water mains scheme with the reduction of the number of —

Mr Speaker: Order. I believe that I know where the Member might be going. *[Interruption.]* Order. This is a specific question on Mid Ulster, and he maybe could in some way look at weaving Mid Ulster into Cookstown. Is that a possibility?

Mr McGlone: I thought that I was giving a guided tour around it rightly, Mr Speaker. The specific question is about Killymuck Road, which is in the constituency, and a pattern seems to be emerging of reduction in the number of contractors working on the scheme, which significantly delayed the scheme by about six weeks.

Mr Kennedy: I am happy to explore that in further detail, and I will write to the Member with a more detailed reply about Killymuck.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister outline which specific areas in Belfast have been identified for improvement in water and sewage systems after the recent flooding?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, the supplementary question is well outside the original question on the Order Paper. I will leave it up to the Minister. We need to be careful that supplementary questions in some way relate to the original question on the Order Paper. Members will know that I am

reasonably flexible if Members can in some way weave their supplementary question into the original question.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker, and I am also grateful for the supplementary question. I know the interest that the Member has in her constituency. The officials in my Department, in conjunction with officials from NI Water, are exploring how best we can address some of the very serious issues that emerged over the summer period in the south Belfast area and in other parts of Northern Ireland, such as east Belfast and west Belfast, areas of east Antrim, Cushendall and, indeed, in Armagh city in my constituency. We are seeking to identify schemes and projects that can alleviate some of the conditions that were so unacceptable for people during the summer period.

Buses

5. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the extent and effect of the introduction of the GX buses. (AQO 2431/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Two Goldline express services are operated by Translink. Those are the 212 Goldline service between Londonderry and Belfast via Glenshane. There has been an increase in customers using that service, and Translink, which has operational responsibility for the provision of services, has advised me that, to deal with that, it has introduced an additional morning and evening journey on the route with effect from 3 September 2012. The two new services are at 6.10 am from Londonderry to Belfast and at 5.45 pm from Belfast to Londonderry. Translink has also decided to reduce the number of stops en route on the two additional services to offer the fastest journey time. Translink will continue to monitor the change to ensure that it meets customer needs. The bus will display GX212 as its service number to enable passengers to identify the two reduced stop services.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his response. What is the average miles-per-gallon fuel usage for the new GX buses, and how does it compare with that of the current fleet?
[Laughter.]

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. If she were to ask me a question on sport, I would have a better chance of answering. However, we will provide the necessary detail as quickly as

possible. We had not expected or predicted that level of detail.

Mr Storey: In relation to the Goldline service, I welcome the fact that Translink has introduced a stop at the Causeway Hospital on the 218 service. I have lobbied Translink for that over a period of time. In light of that welcome provision, will the Minister explain how the Translink Goldline service will be enhanced over the next number of years, given that there is a considerable challenge to his budget in the provision of that service?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It impacts on an earlier question that was unfortunately missed and which related to the Translink budget and the challenging period over the next couple of years. My departmental officials are working with Translink officials to ensure that, to our maximum capacity and ability, we will not impact directly on front line services. However, it is a challenge, there is a shortfall, and such questions need to be tackled and addressed. I am confident that with goodwill and assistance from Executive colleagues, particularly from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, we can reach a satisfactory outcome.

Mr Swann: In addition to and including the GX buses, will the Minister detail the level of investment in new buses?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am pleased to inform him that there is good news about bus journeys and new buses. Of the 77 million public transport journeys made last year, 67 million took place on buses. My Department continues to invest heavily in buying new buses and replacing the old fleet. Since 2004-05, over 900 buses have been purchased at a cost of £135 million. As part of the June monitoring round, I have secured additional funding to allow Translink to purchase 53 additional buses in this financial year, of which 39 will be Goldliners.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his response so far. In the interests of economy and greater efficiency, does Translink have any plans to introduce hybrid buses?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, but I was not quite clear about the term that he used.

Mr Rogers: Hybrid buses.

Mr Kennedy: Hybrid buses; OK. Primarily, of course, those are matters for Translink, but I will endeavour to have a reply sent to the Member on the issue as quickly as possible.

Translink: Staff Uniforms

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the total cost of providing new uniforms for staff at Translink. (AQO 2432/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised that the cost of providing uniforms to Translink staff in the most recent roll-out is in the region of £785,000. It should be noted that that is an estimate and may be subject to change. Like all transport companies, Translink is a customer-focused organisation, employing close to 4,000 staff — I wish it were more — and it believes that it is imperative that the staff look smart and professional. The number of staff who are provided with uniforms is 3,717. Allocation for the replacement of uniforms was, therefore, factored in to Translink's budget.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. When were the uniforms last replaced?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the supplementary question. My understanding is that, generally, Translink updates its uniforms approximately every 18 months. Such a timescale is on a par with others in the industry, although the level of provision of the particular items of apparel will change from operator to operator.

Lord Morrow: No doubt, the provision of new uniforms is very important for Translink drivers. Will the Minister tell us whether the chief executive has made up her mind about when she will meet the Committee? Is it his view that it is important that she meets the Committee? Will he confirm that he has given no instructions for her not to meet the Committee?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary questions. Obviously, I am aware of ongoing contact between the chief executive and senior executives from Translink and the Committee for Regional Development. I expect that engagement to continue, and I have no difficulty confirming that at no stage would I suggest to anyone that they not meet. I happily confirm that. I think that it is important that there is a full exchange and maximum understanding between the Regional Development Committee and Translink's executives. It is a challenging period for us all,

but it is important that information is shared and assistance given — I have no doubt that that can be sought and obtained from the Regional Development Committee — to help to deal with and address some of the significantly challenging issues that Translink has to face.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I remind Members about asking supplementary questions. I know that the Minister was slightly thrown by the last supplementary question from Lord Morrow, which was far outside the original question. I know that the Minister answered the question, but it throws the Minister when a supplementary is asked that has no reference whatsoever to the original question. It is only through the Minister's goodwill that he decided to answer the question. Let us move on.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Staying with Translink, can he detail the costs of the concessionary fares scheme, and does his Department receive an equivalent amount from DFP for it? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. In line with others, perhaps it is slightly out of kilter. Concessionary affairs — sorry, fares, never mind affairs — apply to everyone across the general population who is aged 60 and over, which, I am sure, is nobody in this room, and to other specific categories, such as people who are registered blind.

Last year, we spent nearly £37 million on concessionary fares. That figure is expected to increase this year, on the basis of current passenger journey trends, and I have raised the issue of funding concessionary fares with the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

3.30 pm

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety

Business resumed:

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the work that is being done. My party colleague Mr Wells commented on drug and alcohol abuse. What is being done to combat the issue of legal highs?

Mr Poots: In recent years, we have seen the emergence of so-called legal highs such as mephedrone. At this point, I emphasise that just because substances are labelled as being legal, it does not mean that they are safe. When they are analysed, they are often found to contain illegal substances. I am pleased to say that we have been working closely with our colleagues across the UK and Ireland on the issue, and legislation has been passed in Westminster that will allow emerging substances to be placed under a temporary ban while full consideration is given to their harm. That should help us to react more quickly to stop those substances getting a foothold in the UK.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

In Northern Ireland, we have introduced a drug and alcohol monitoring and information system to help identify new trends in substances at an early stage and to inform key stakeholders. If appropriate, we will pass the information on to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and the Home Office. I understand that we have continued to see a range of apparently new substances, such as ocean snow, appear on the market. However, when seized, they often contain substances, including mephedrone, that have already been banned. It is therefore important that we continue to undertake enforcement activity on those substances and on those selling them. It should be noted that the terminology is important and that the term "legal high" is misleading, as the Medicines Act that makes it illegal to sell, supply or advertise for human consumption regulates most of these substances. In addition, we need to consider carefully how we deliver information on the new substances. The last thing that we need to do is inadvertently highlight new substances, which may encourage their use. However, our

general message is clear: just because the products are labelled as being legal does not mean that they are safe. In fact, these potentially lethal substances may pose a serious health risk. When tested, many of the substances are shown to contain banned substances, so you risk being prosecuted and getting a criminal record for drug possession.

Mr Allister: Is it still the case that the cross-border body the Food Safety Promotion Board is established and operates exclusively in the Republic of Ireland, employing only staff from there, when we generously continue to support it? As we fast approach the end of 2012, is it the situation that its 2012 budget and business plan have yet to be approved? If so, why? What is the consequence of that on the legality of its ongoing expenditure?

Mr Poots: The first matter was not discussed at the meeting. The second matter is an issue that we are discussing. The business plan has not been brought forward, because, as yet, I have not given it approval to be brought forward. In conjunction with Minister Reilly, I think that there is a degree of duplication, and we are not content to support duplication of services. Therefore, we are looking at the situation and challenging it. We will seek to ensure that the work that is delivered by the board is work that is absolutely necessary and not work that duplicates other work that is being carried out by other organisations.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can the Minister advise on what is being done to stop internet sites that promote suicide?

Mr Poots: The internet is a very powerful tool. It is a powerful tool for good, but it can also be a powerful tool for bad. It can promote and support awareness of suicide prevention and signposting for vulnerable people. However, the issue of pro-suicide websites should concern all of us. It is an offence to aid, abet or counsel a person in ending their life. The offence carries a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison, and it applies to online as much as offline activity. The law was clarified in 2009 to reflect that position. At present, the people posting or hosting pro-suicide material on the sites are not necessarily breaking the law. However, the updating of legislation has made it easier for internet service providers to restrict the availability of harmful material and to take down inappropriate material when notified of its existence. The UK Council for Child Internet Safety also provides advice to internet service providers. One of the problems is that, almost

as quickly as you take one down, another one can spring up . Nonetheless, that is not a reason for us not to pursue those who promote such sites.

Executive Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Second Stage

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill [NIA 9/11-15] be agreed.

The Bill will provide a statutory basis for the development of business improvement districts or BIDs, as they are known. I believe that we should do all that we can as an Executive to stimulate our economy and help to drive back the effects of the recent recession. Providing a statutory basis for business improvement districts will contribute to that aim.

Business improvement districts date from the 1970s, and the first one was established in Canada by retailers in a small town as a reaction to the loss of trade to out-of-town shopping centres. The retailers got together, drew up a plan of action and agreed to each pay an annual levy to create a pot of money to fund agreed improvements in their area. The first BID was a success, and there are now more than 1,400 BIDs operating worldwide. UK-wide BIDs currently operate in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Swindon, Swansea, Nottingham and many other towns and cities. There are around 140 BIDs in the UK, with a number also in development. The overwhelming majority — about 90% — have been successful in securing a yes vote in the renewal ballot. That shows that BIDs are working. A couple of successful BIDs have also been established in the Republic of Ireland, in Dublin city centre and Dundalk, and successful votes to renew both BIDs were recently secured.

Here in Northern Ireland, BIDs can currently operate on a voluntary basis. Indeed, there is one established in Ballymena. However, the legislation that I am bringing forward will put an onus on all businesses in a BID area to pay the BID levy if a proposal is agreed by a vote, rather than being able to opt out. Under the current voluntary arrangements, businesses may refuse to pay but still benefit from the investment by others. That is clearly unfair.

A BID might deliver any number of services, such as better access to tourist information, street cleaning and waste disposal services, CCTV coverage, special events to attract

visitors and even training courses to assist small businesses. However, those are all in addition to and not instead of public investment. Local businesses are best placed to identify what actions need to be taken and where funding from the BID levy should be focused to improve their physical environment and make it more attractive for consumers to visit, thereby increasing footfall to the area and generating more revenue through increased consumer spending.

The legislation is very flexible to allow various options for a BID, for example by business type, such as clothing shops, by geographical area, or by themes such as tourism, for rural BIDs, BIDs in urban locations, industrial business parks or for a BID that crosses local council boundaries. The onus is therefore on local businesses, in partnership with their local council, to decide if they would like to take forward a BID. Businesses do not have to wait until the legislation is in place to begin drawing up their proposals for a BID. Indeed, experience from other areas is that it can take between 18 months and two years to get a BID established. It is clear from the consultation responses, the Assembly questions tabled on the topic and meetings involving myself or other departmental officials with local traders, business organisations and local government that there is significant interest in and support for the concept of BIDs. On that basis, I hope that all parties can give the proposals their full support.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First, on behalf of the Committee, I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the Chamber for its Second Stage.

The Committee obviously welcomes the fact that we now have the Bill for consideration. Indeed, we brought forward our call for evidence earlier in the summer. That was being conducted throughout the summer, and we will hopefully conclude that around 21 September. So, we have not been sitting on this. We have already taken briefings from a variety of stakeholders and departmental officials. The last occasion was 28 June. The Minister clearly laid out what a business improvement district will actually be. It will be, obviously, an area, however defined, in which local businesses can come together with partner agencies to develop a project or programme that will enable them to enhance the business product in that community and to encourage the local economy. Particularly in light of current discussions about FG Wilson

and other elements of the economy, it is important that we consider earnestly any measure that will help to improve the local economy and what it has on offer for all concerned.

The Committee will obviously take a lot of other opinions into account when it fully and properly considers the Bill. So far, a number of members have raised issues — they are not so much concerns — that need to be further fleshed out. I appreciate that the Minister has already alluded to that and to the fact that there are a lot of flexibilities in this. One thing I would like to point out, with the little bit of experience that we have had of, for example, recent discussions in Committee of landlord registration, is that a lot of the work will be on secondary legislation or statutory regulations. We discovered recently and have been told that further improvements or development work around that Bill is circumscribed by the original primary legislation. Therefore, people need to be mindful that legislation may eventually be delivered more by way of statutory rules and regulations. We are just flagging that up. Members will be concerned about that, because we have learned a bad lesson from the landlord registration scheme. I cite that as an example of where members felt that they would have liked to improve the current Bill more but were told that that was not really possible given the limitations of the primary legislation. So, when looking at this legislation, we will be mindful that we want to get it right.

Again, thinking of the current economic climate, I am sure that the Minister is aware that in March this year the Housing Minister, Grant Shapps, announced a £500,000 fund for business improvement districts to help town centres access loans for their set-up costs. That is an issue that we will have to deal with. That was obviously part of the implementation of the Portas recommendations. The Minister is, of course, aware that we have been advised that the median cost of setting up a BID will be in and around £60,000. The Department should look at the possibility of supporting some start-up costs or even finding a way of limiting the time frame within which BID proposals work themselves through, which can be 18 months or two years. All of that could help the local economy and the proposers of BIDs. I ask the Minister and the Department to look at the repercussions, if any, of the £500,000 fund that was set up in Britain. That is something that the Minister can look at. The intention to set up a statutory framework to establish BIDs is very important, but we also need to look at other ways of easing that, either financially or in the process.

3.45 pm

The Committee has also questioned the value of making BIDs mandatory arrangements, but, of course, we understand — the Minister referred to this — that there is the issue of whether or not you make a process mandatory or voluntary. There are arguments on either side of that coin. If people can opt out, they may be able ultimately to benefit from the price that others are prepared to pay. Given that we are likely to move to the mandatory arrangements, the democratic basis of that has to be looked at. When we look at the basis on which businesses can go forward with a BID, we see that the ballot proposal in particular needs to be looked at, more specifically the third of the four conditions. The level of participation of traders within a given area has to be set at only 25%. Many people would think that may be too low, but, again, that is something we will look at.

I referred to the lessons learned about the issue of substantive primary legislation and what may follow by way of regulations, so it is important that we get the primary legislation right. The Committee looks forward in the next weeks to finalising its consideration of the legislation. We will scrutinise it and, as with all these things, the devil is in the detail. We look forward to a successful outcome for the legislation, which, we believe and hope, can encourage small, local businesses and help them to flourish, businesses that, many argue, have been and will continue to be the mainstay of our local economy.

Ms P Bradley: I declare an interest as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council, which will have some involvement in BIDs. I also feel it is only apt that I should mention that I am a director of a small business.

Improvement districts are a concept that originated in the United States. As the Minister stated, they now work well on the UK mainland and in the Republic of Ireland. It is evident how they can benefit greatly businesses that rely on footfall, such as shops.

My constituency office in Glengormley is in an area that has a number of disadvantages. The general area can look run-down, there is an overabundance of fast food outlets, and there is direct competition from out-of-town shopping centres. I can see how business improvement districts could benefit the shops and retail outlets in the area and help to improve business. However, I can also see how the introduction of the districts could be alarming for tenants such as community and voluntary

organisations, which are present on our high streets, as well as businesses that do not rely on footfall.

I understand that BIDs can be for as specific an area as one street or a cluster of streets; that the lead will come from businesses in the areas, with support, guidance and practical help from local councils; and that safeguards are built into the voting practice to try to ensure that small businesses are not railroaded into a BID. I still have reservations about the level of knowledge among small business owners about the Bill and how it will have the capacity to change what, until now, has been a casual, voluntary arrangement to one whereby, if a small business owner does not support the BID proposal, he or she can be compelled to enter into a BID if the majority in the area agrees to the proposal. I also understand that it is up to the BID proposers to outline and decide on any exceptions to the levy, which may mean that voluntary and community organisations within a BID proposal area may not be automatically exempt from the levy and may, in fact, be compelled to pay a levy if they are on a street that is 90% retail yet may not get any benefit from that levy. In the current economic climate, I worry that the levy may have the potential to double up on services that are already being provided and paid through the regional rate and that the extra financial burden may force businesses into further financial hardship.

Despite those concerns, however, I can also see the benefits of the districts and what they have to offer in areas such as Glengormley. I am encouraged by the high rate of renewal of districts already operational in areas of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. I am also encouraged by the fact that the majority of BIDs are driven by small businesses and that flexibility is built in to allow the BIDs to be as specific as to include, for example, all chip shops in a given area or every business in that area. That may offer some protection to the tenants of high street properties that do not rely on footfall for their business. I also particularly like the concept that this could help small businesses gain the benefit of economies of scale when purchasing electricity or gas supplies. I also welcome the core premise that it will provide local people and businesses with the ability to deal with local issues and come up with local resolutions. Therefore, I am persuaded to support the Bill, despite any reservations I may have outlined.

Mr Copeland: I, too, echo the sentiments of the Members who spoke previously, particularly those of the Chair of the Social Development Committee. I spent many years in the

construction industry, which did not really have a massive rates burden, and in retail. I asked myself frequently then what exactly I was paying for, as I did not feel that I got much for it. Indeed, I am also asked that question frequently now by those who are in business and receive rates bills.

I saw Times Square, an area that has benefited from this, both before and after the BID project was attempted. I have to say that the change was remarkable. Today, we are considering what I would describe as a seed that may, at some stage, grow into something good and useful. It will depend largely on how it is sold to small shopkeepers and businessmen. Many of them open their doors at 9.00 am, work until closing time, take their books home and work beyond that. Bringing them together in a way in which they will voluntarily take up additional taxation will require a great deal of good salesmanship, for want of a better word. There will perhaps be a suspicion that the money raised will be replacement funding and will not allow money to be spent in other areas. That suspicion needs to be nailed at a very early stage.

We are considering the Bill's Second Stage, and it has not yet come to the Committee in any workable form. At this stage, my view is to remain completely open-minded and accept that, on the face of it, this appears to be a good idea with merits. However, as the Chair said, the devil in these things is always in the detail.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to see the Bill before the House today. Its subject was initially aired in 2010 by the Minister's predecessor. As Members have outlined, the Bill is geared towards the creation of business partnerships to reinvigorate and regenerate the areas in which they exist. Those groupings will allow businesses to work together to identify and fund additional services to improve their commercial environment.

The Bill will provide a statutory basis for the development of business improvement districts. In practice, full control of a BID will lie with the businesses in an area, which could consist of one street, many streets or, as Paula Bradley outlined, specific business premises. However, BIDs will only be established should a majority of businesses vote to do so.

At a time when businesses are struggling and our town centres are becoming more desolate, giving them the power to establish a BID could help them, through collaboration, to maximise benefit to their area and, hopefully, increase

their attractiveness and profitability. A successful BID can make money go further and help local entrepreneurs promote their services and areas locally and further afield. The NIIRTA report, 'Town Centre First', stated that over 1,000 small shops closed in Northern Ireland in 2011. The report anticipates that this trend will continue and that the number of closures will double between 2012 and 2014. That is a chilling prospect for our local economy. The Bill represents an attempt by the Assembly to create a legislative toolbox for local businesses to help them ride out this economic storm by coming together.

We have seen areas in the North look at the use of BIDs. The Minister mentioned Ballymena, and Belfast City Centre Management has published a report that highlights BIDs and how they can be used as a method of financing additional services to improve the trading environment. Indeed, voluntary arrangements such as that have been in existence for many years in many locations across the North. We have also seen how BIDs have succeeded in other jurisdictions. What has been particularly successful in England is local businesses coming together to negotiate with local recycling companies, offsetting the cost of waste collection against payments for some of the recycled materials. This legislation, however, differs from the current position on voluntary BIDs, as business owners will no longer be able to refuse to pay the BID levy but happily avail themselves of the benefits that have been paid for by others. Although that will certainly safeguard against some businesses piggybacking on others, I am concerned — I raised the issue in Committee — that some businesses will be forced to pay for services that they do not want, do not require or cannot afford. The reason why we have so many empty shops on our high streets is that so many cannot afford their overheads. Will giving them an additional bill to pay solve that?

Many businesses may already feel that they pay more than enough in rates. For that reason, the Committee and the Assembly should look more closely at supporting and funding the establishment of BIDs. The Department has stated that it will not release additional resources to support local businesses with start-up costs, but it has been widely reported that the availability of such funding to support BID development is crucial. BIDs in England have relied heavily on local authority and other development agency funding for start-up costs, as noted by research from the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2007. Therefore, although I support the efforts of the Department

in bringing forward this legislation, we need to consider the issue of funding further to maximise its potential for success in practice. Although DSD has stated its inability or unwillingness to provide resources, we could look at initiatives such as temporary rate relief in areas to incentivise and maximise participation and potential for success. Perhaps Departments or local authorities could match fund contributions from BIDs to carry out improvements to an area.

Despite my concerns, it is noteworthy that 35 of 37 respondents to the consultation on the Bill expressed support. I am sure that businesses will be delighted to gain some control over their own environment. They have a much greater understanding of their needs than statutory agencies do. Given the dire economic situation, we as a Government must work with businesses and councils to aid the establishment of BIDs and reassure smaller and not-for-profit businesses of the flexibilities in the legislation, as outlined by Paula Bradley. BIDs can exclude particular types of business in a given area, for example, if that is how the BID is formed, or impose a lower levy or give an exemption for a particular reason, such as for charity shops, if agreed. Done properly, the legislation could bring about tremendous benefits for our businesses, customers, towns and cities. Done badly, it could result in more confusion and closures. I look forward to the Committee Stage of the Bill and our collective efforts to get it right.

Mrs Cochrane: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill as introduced by the Minister and to discuss its principles. Having first discussed the issue of business improvement districts in Northern Ireland with a number of stakeholders not long after beginning my term in the Assembly, I welcome the arrival of the legislation with a sense of fulfilment.

As things stand, there is little in the way of formal regulation to standardise potential BID schemes, so our community traders and patrons repeatedly find themselves facing difficulties in establishing boundaries, securing local government support and obtaining contributions from prospective beneficiaries. As has already been stated, the Bill primarily provides for statutory provisions to enable BIDs to operate under a legislative charter, giving additional rights and protections to those it serves to benefit and bringing us further into line with what is already in operation throughout Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

4.00 pm

The preliminary clauses, rather appropriately, establish the conditions for the role of councils in regulating future BIDs, as, understandably, specific needs and convention will vary on a district-by-district basis. It is envisaged that councils will make necessary arrangements in their defined areas; that they can, along with others involved, make voluntary financial contributions to fund schemes; and that they will establish ring-fenced revenue accounts to maintain funds raised for specific BID projects. Although certain procedural details remain outstanding from the Bill, the intent and end goal of the measures represents a huge step forward for community business precincts throughout Northern Ireland and, hopefully, a much-needed stimulus to the local economy.

The Bill also makes significant provisions for the regulation of BID approval through the balloting of key stakeholders and, importantly, identified ratepayers; the entitlement to vote and the voting requirements necessary for approval; and the circumstances and rights for vetoing proposals and appealing veto decisions. Those particular clauses place a great deal of emphasis on the discretion, authority and, ultimately, responsibility of the councils in administering proposed BID projects. We should, therefore, be mindful of any implications, be they financial or practical, that any future RPA changes may bear on any proposals that we bring forward.

Further detail found in the Bill and its supporting documentation estimates that the financial effects of the changes will not have any significant implications for DSD, as the Department has reasoned that, owing to the largely supportive role that it will play, as opposed to administering or managing schemes, that commitment can be met from existing resources. However, we must be mindful of the high degree of expectation that may be placed on our councils, which may then need to have in post additional officers with the necessary skills, expertise and enthusiasm to assist stakeholders with BIDs.

I have spoken with a range of stakeholders about how positive an impact the adoption of BIDs legislation could have on Northern Ireland. There has been a particular curiosity around developments in that area from a number of established traders' associations in my East Belfast constituency. Groups such as the Ballyhackamore Business Association, pioneered by local businesswoman Brenda Shankey, have already begun to plant strong seeds of communal development and co-operative improvements, engaging local residents and harvesting a renewed sense of

community to the ultimate benefit of traders. It is my hope that that can be built on in the future with the onset of the legislation. I support the Bill's principles and objectives.

Mr Easton: It is a well-known fact of business life that our business community is facing one of its most difficult periods. That is especially true of small towns and villages that have to compete not just with online businesses and retailers that have lower overheads and are easily accessed but with larger towns and cities, as well as out-of-town super-shopping centres. Competition is a good thing, but for many of our smaller towns and villages, the competition is not always fair. Therefore, I believe that our retailers and businesses deserve this Business Improvement Districts Bill.

The Bill will give a level of control to businesses operating in a certain area. It offers a long-term, sustainable source of finance to support an agreed package of services, which will increase business to their premises. It is also about giving local businesses the opportunity to develop local solutions to local issues. This is not a top-down approach to supporting business. Local businesses, with support and guidance from local government, will be the ones making the decisions. The role of local government will provide a degree of security for those businesses involved, as it will be their duty to establish a ring-fenced BID revenue account to hold funds raised by the local levy. The local council will also be able to veto a BID proposal in certain exceptional circumstances.

I welcome the checks that have been included in the Bill to ensure that one large business cannot force through a BID proposal against smaller businesses. That should reassure anyone who is worried. Providing a legislative framework for BIDs will remove the often voluntary agreements that have already been happening in certain areas. Everyone in a BID area where the ballot is successful will be required to pay a levy, but the underlying belief in having such a levy is that the businesses should aim to achieve levy neutrality. There is so much scope and flexibility in the Bill that, with the correct enthusiasm, guidance and expertise, it will open a number of exciting possibilities. Economies of scale can be used in such districts to promote maximum savings and reduce overheads for businesses that are in the BID areas. I believe that traders in my area of Bangor and Holywood are anxious for such a Bill to become law so that they can develop capacity and make real decisions about what will increase business in their area. After all, they are the experts and can often see

what legislators, who are not on the ground day to day, fail to grasp.

We are aware that many towns and cities have already started to develop their BID proposals in anticipation of the legislation. Current evidence suggests that the timescale for developing such a proposal is between 18 months and 24 months, but I would like to see that lowered, if possible. A certain number of steps need to be taken to complete a proposal. That is evidence that the business community has seen the potential of the Bill and is keen to be able to take full advantage of its becoming law.

This is not a new, risky model. We have the benefit of being able to see it in operation not just in the United States, where the idea was developed, but in other areas of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. I believe that we have a Bill that is open and flexible, with the potential to improve many towns and villages across Northern Ireland. The Bill gives businesses in particular areas more control over their own destinies, and I believe that local businesses in my area want me to support them by supporting the Bill.

Having met traders from High Street in Bangor recently, I heard at first hand about the concerns and positives that they are experiencing in this economic climate. I believe that the Bill, coupled with the Bangor and Holywood 10- to 15-year master plans, is a positive thing. The public realms work for Bangor and Holywood, which will see £8 million and £2 million respectively going into those areas, is also positive. There was also the Minister's announcement last week about Queen's Parade, which will see £250,000 in stop-gap funding to help that area. I believe that the Bill is exciting, and it has my full support.

Ms Brown: As a member of the Social Development Committee, I support the Bill's Second Stage. I also declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council.

The House well knows the damage that the recession is doing to our local town centres up and down the country. Businesses today face more challenges than ever. They cannot rely on the banks, which seem to have forgotten that they owe their very existence to those to whom they now refuse to lend, and pressures on government and family finances mean that less money is around to help retailers to hold their own in these troubled times. Business improvement districts exist in other parts of the United Kingdom, including some of the busiest

high streets in London, such as Bond Street, Oxford Street and Regent Street.

Business improvement districts — BIDs for short — relate to a defined area in which businesses voluntarily pay an additional fee to fund improvements within a district's boundaries. Those businesses take charge and decide how those funds are to be used for their mutual benefit and for improving their respective areas. My constituency also has two local authorities — Newtownabbey and Antrim — within its boundaries. Therefore, I welcome clause 2 of the Bill, which sets out arrangements whereby two local authorities may permit the development of one BID within the boundaries of each district.

I support the Bill, and I believe that BIDs offer local businesses and entrepreneurs the chance to improve their respective areas for the benefit of all local businesses and people. It provides local businesses with a level of autonomy, and through funding provided by the payment of an additional rate on those businesses, it also gives them a way to take their own ideas forward for the betterment of the communities in which they operate. I believe that the legislation and BIDs will help to build better relationships between councils and local businesses in a BID area.

I am pleased that the Minister has allowed a generous degree of flexibility in how a scheme is adopted and operated in a local area. That is to be seen in the general framework of the Bill. That is so important, because every area is different. It will also allow different areas to try different approaches that will suit them.

Safeguards also exist in the oversight role of the relevant council, which can veto decisions that the BID makes that it feels are not in line with policy. Local councils' actions are, in turn, overseen by the Department. I, therefore, believe that there is significant merit in the Bill, and BIDs' practice and set-up elsewhere shows us that they are proving successful in having a positive influence in the community. I support the Bill.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill. This Bill represents an opportunity for businesses in our towns and villages to avail themselves of local measures, on their own terms and conditions, which they are primarily responsible for driving forward, to help improve the local business environment. At the same time, we need to be cautious that, in the current economic climate, businesses are

not placed under any additional undue regulation and unreasonable costs.

It is often said that the high street is a visible indication of how well the local community and economy is doing. However, we do not need to be told that. A quick look around many parts of Northern Ireland shows that the downturn has hit our smaller businesses hard. It is a shame that many of our town centres and main shopping streets are being devastated in the current climate, first, by the larger shopping centres and the emergence of out-of-town retail parks but, secondly, by the squeeze on people's pockets.

Northern Ireland has the highest level of shop vacancy across the United Kingdom. It is a crying shame that almost one in five shops lies vacant. I am sure that we can all identify such areas in our constituencies, and although we can always point to a new shop opening or another expanding, on the whole, the trend is deeply worrying.

Last week's announcement from FG Wilson came out of the blue for many people — not least, it appears, the Executive Ministers. However, it served as an unwelcome reminder of the precarious situation that many businesses in Northern Ireland find themselves in. Not only that, it demonstrated more clearly than anything in some time that the political approach taken thus far to the downturn in Northern Ireland is not working and that Departments need to change tack and step up a gear. Businesses need action.

I am glad that the Minister for Social Development is now following through on previous departmental commitments on BIDs. If we look at England, it is clear that, with sufficient local buy-in, they work. They should be taken in collaboration with a whole series of other initiatives. They have been proven to help local smaller businesses by increasing footfall and consumer spend. They were also a key recommendation of the Mary Portas review of high streets. She stated that town centres need to start running like businesses. I agree, but I also think that businesses should be afforded the space necessary to develop their own solutions. That is why I think that the concept of allowing local businesses to come together in areas defined by their local council, pool resources and use that money on what they determine most suitable is so simple yet so brilliant.

I do not doubt for one moment that, by allowing businesses the power to directly effect change locally, imaginative yet workable solutions will

be brought forward without delay across all participating schemes. Given that it is their own cash at risk, businesses will be determined to ensure that resources go only to the most worthy schemes from which there will be maximum return. However, it would be remiss of me not to raise the fact that, ultimately, if this Bill and its secondary legislation is successful, businesses located in an area that opts to become a BID will face additional costs through the levy. Every penny of operating expenditure at the moment is money that will be taken from potential profits. Given the democratic nature of BID schemes, we have to acknowledge that there will always be potential losers: businesses that have lost in their opposition to the scheme and find themselves involuntary levy-paying members of it.

Nevertheless, today's debate is a welcome step. However, I would be grateful if the Minister would explain why it has taken so long to reach this stage. His predecessor in the Department launched the public consultation in December 2010. By the time this Bill receives Royal Assent, it will be the guts of two years since that initial announcement. A lot of businesses have suffered in the meantime, and I hope that the Minister has a suitable answer as to why they have had to wait so long for a relatively simple measure to be brought forward. I welcome the progression of the Bill.

Mr Ross: In many ways, this has been a useful Second Stage. The Second Stage debate is to discuss the general principles of the Bill, and I think that what we have heard from Members right across the Chamber shows that, in general, we support the aims and objectives of the Bill. However, we have also heard varying degrees of scepticism. My colleague Alex Easton said that he was excited about the Bill. I think he used the same phrase in Committee. Mr Durkan has, perhaps, been slightly more on the sceptical wing. However, there are Members on that sliding scale who are generally supportive but have some concerns.

4.15 pm

The Minister, in his opening comments, talked about the need to tackle the decline of UK town centres. All of us recognise that in our constituencies, and it has been on the agenda for quite some time. If BIDs can play a role in reversing that decline, that will, of course, be very welcome. Thursday's news of job losses at FG Wilson has had a huge impact in East Antrim. Meetings of business leaders took place on Friday afternoon, and there will be more on Wednesday afternoon in Larne and

Carrick. They are particularly concerned that, after Thursday's news, they will find it even more difficult because the local population will not have the same spending power. They are very concerned about what they can do, and what government can help them with, to regenerate the town centres.

As other Members said, this concept originated in the United States, where, in the main, it has produced cleaner and safer business areas that became more attractive to people. Indeed, much of the research shows increased footfall in those areas, which, of course, we would also welcome.

There are now, as Members also said, in the region of 110 BID areas across the UK and Ireland. In many ways, a BID allows strong leadership at local level to take a lead in the economic development of town centres. That is important and is something that we should encourage because we want to see decisions taken at as low a level as possible. Local decision-making is very important, and we should encourage it.

There has been a question of whether we need legislation at all in this process. It is a question that I asked at Committee: if businesses are free to do this at the moment, why do we need legislation? That led to a Committee discussion on the issue of freeloading. If two businesses at each end of a street wanted to form a BID, but the one in the middle did not, it would not need to pay into the BID but would get all the benefits from it. Of course, that is a difficulty, and this statutory framework tries to address it. However, in doing so, as my colleague Paula Bradley said, it creates other difficulties. If a small business does not want to become part of a BID, but other businesses around it do, it will be obliged to pay into and become part of that BID. Many small businesses that, as other Members said, are perhaps struggling, will be forced into something they do not want to do. Perhaps they will be trapped into it. We need to examine that in further detail when we get to Committee Stage.

As well as potential difficulties, the scheme has a number of benefits, and I will briefly outline what I see those as being. In any BID, the process whereby the businesses that will directly benefit from it are those that fund it is a fairly good model that has been successful when it has operated elsewhere. It means that those businesses are motivated to ensure that they get value for the money that they put into the BID and to ensure that they get the outcomes that they desire as well. That is a

good use of money, and, as I said, it has worked reasonably well elsewhere.

It also provides a degree of stability in terms of the funding available for the BID area. They know what annual revenue will come in from the levy placed on all the BID members, and that gives them a certain security when planning. In many other areas where organisations, or groups of organisations, rely on government funding, that cannot always be said because they are not given security of funding for future years. In a BID process, businesses would come together for a period of, most likely, five years. The length of the BID process would give them a certain security. It would also allow shops and businesses in an area to come together to act as a single economic unit, in much the same way as out-of-town shopping centres have been able to do. That would give them a unity of purpose that can only be a good thing.

Another benefit mentioned by other Members is that this is a good example of where public and private can work together, as private businesses will be able to work with local councils in delivering the BID process. That is a good example of the public and private sectors working in partnership to improve an area. I am keen to see more such partnership working in some of the Assembly's work.

Having said that, there are potential difficulties, as other Members have mentioned, and they need to be flagged up and examined when we get to Committee Stage. First, there are concerns about how long it would take to set up a BID, the cost to all the businesses involved, and, indeed, the amount of volunteer time needed. Perhaps it would be a challenge for smaller businesses to ensure that they are able to have full input into the BID and have personnel who are able to contribute to it. Potentially, it could be a difficult challenge for smaller businesses.

My colleague Mr Easton talked about mechanisms to ensure that smaller businesses are not railroaded and voiceless in the BID process and that one or a number of businesses do not dominate it. Again, we need to look at that during Committee Stage to ensure that it does not happen. With regard to the voluntary aspect, will we look at BIDs to fund volunteers or staff to organise the BID process? We need to look at that issue.

I listened to Judith Cochrane's comments. She mentioned how BIDs would, perhaps, place a further burden on councils because they may have to provide additional staff to organise BIDs

and that sort of stuff. Of course, the reverse is also true. There may be concern that if a BID is working particularly well, local councils might take a back seat and not fulfil their economic development role. It is important that where that partnership exists, it functions properly and that councils do not just take a back seat, allow BIDs to operate, and do not fulfil their functions. It is important, therefore, that the Assembly ensures that that partnership exists and that local councils are not allowed to take their eyes off the ball and their economic functions.

In conclusion, it is important to note what local businesses have been saying. They are generally supportive of BIDs and the Bill. It is important that we listen to them. As I have said, there have been concerns, particularly about whether this will work in many town centres — especially those where, perhaps, there is a higher vacancy rate or there are charity shops and banks. The example of constituency offices in town centres was used. There is concern about whether all those businesses would be able to take part in the BID and whether it is appropriate that they take part. We need to look at that issue.

Therefore, plenty of work needs to be done. There is plenty of scope for the Bill to be a success. As I said, Second Stage is about the general principles of the Bill. I support the Bill's general principles and look forward to examining it in further detail at Committee Stage.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Alastair Ross.

Mr Ross: That was me.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry. I call Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: I do not think that any of us need to be persuaded that many of our town centres and hitherto busy trading streets need to be rejuvenated. We can all think of many examples. Indeed, any time that I look out of the window of my constituency office in Charles Street, Ballymoney, I see a classic example of a blot of dereliction, which one only hopes and wishes could be rejuvenated and with it give a bounce to much of the town.

However, the question — and I hope that this is so — is whether BIDs can make a worthwhile contribution to that rejuvenation. On reading the Bill, part of the problem that I have in answering that question for myself is that, by and large, the Bill is a blank canvas. It takes

huge refuge in future DSD regulations, in which all sorts of things will become clear when the regulations emerge. Most of them will be subject to negative resolution. Therefore, de facto, the House is being asked to approve the outline framework of a Bill with much of the detail yet to become clear. I have some questions which arise from that.

Ultimately, we are probably fooling ourselves if we think that our hard-pressed businesses can rejuvenate our town centres. Indeed, it would be wrong — I hope that it is not part of the Bill — to pass the buck to the retailers and ratepayers. It is crystal clear that there will have to be a greater and combined effort in which DSD plays a part. I would like to hear from the Minister whether, in tandem with these proposals, he has any thoughts about what contribution DSD might make to the BID arrangements. Or is it a case of "over to you, ratepayers, best of luck, because there is no money here for you". Is that the basic approach? It should not be as easy as that for DSD simply to shirk responsibility through the introduction of the legislation. I trust that that is not what is intended.

Indeed, such is the vagueness of some of the clauses that it is even possible that someone in an arrangement, as things stand, could put an obligation on DSD to contribute. Clause 3(1) states:

"The persons specified in subsection (2) may make financial contributions".

Clause 3(2)(a) goes on to state that those persons are the district council, and, in clause 3(2)(b):

"any other person authorised or required to do so in accordance with the arrangements."

What if some enterprising businesspeople were to write into the arrangement, which they will put to a ballot to other ratepayers, an obligation on DSD to contribute? I suspect that the Minister will very quickly tell us that he will not allow that to happen, and that it will be one of things that he will block, using the regulations. As the Bill stands, however, that would seem to be an option.

Is that an option? Should it be an option? Can it be an option? The Minister needs to wrestle with those questions, because it would appear, according to anything that I have read in the Bill, that, subject to its being negated in the upcoming regulations, part of an arrangement could be an expectation that DSD or some

other Department might, in fact, contribute. One wonders whether that option will be there.

Clause 4 makes it clear that district councils that make the BID arrangements must comply with them. That raises the question of whether all ratepayers must comply with them. Here, I think, we come to one of the difficult, touchy areas in the Bill. The levy is to be paid to the council, and the council is then obligated to implement the scheme. However, it could be a scheme that, under the terms of the Bill, comes to the council with the support of only 13% of ratepayers in the given area, because only a majority of as low a poll as 25% is required. Thirteen per cent could say that this is how it is to be, this is what the levy is for, and provided it is backed by 13% of the NAV holders and ratepayers, it passes the test of the Bill.

I have serious reservations about whether that 25% threshold is high enough. It will be in no one's interest to set trader against trader in our town centres and to have people simply trying to say that an arrangement is being imposed on them by, effectively, a minority. You might well ask those people why they did not vote to stop it, but very many people who complain after the event are those who have not voted. We all know that in the House. Do not be surprised if that is also a component of these ballots, which could be held. We should look carefully at the 25% threshold for participation in a vote in favour of a particular arrangement.

4.30 pm

What about those who are outvoted? What about the business striving and struggling to pay its existing rates? No matter how much that business owner's heart might go with a proposition, his head will tell him, "I do not have the money. I cannot pay for it." If he does not have the money to pay for it, is he to be driven out of business? What if he opts for a bit of civil disobedience, a concept with which the Minister may not be unfamiliar? Is he to be hounded through the courts? The Minister can tell us, but presumably the levy, once approved, will become as enforceable as the rates. Someone can be taken to court. Proceedings and default action can be taken, and people can ultimately find themselves bankrupted for not paying the levy. The danger of some small businesses being driven out of business by this proposition needs to be considered.

Does the levy attach to the property? If a levy is attached through one of the ballots, and I sell my small business, presumably the successor in title inherits that obligation. Does the levy in fact attach to the property and go with the

property as something that must be enforced? Can the Minister tell us whether the Bill anticipates that among those enfranchised to vote on the proposition are those who do not pay rates? I refer to charity shops that occupy streets. Are they to be entitled to vote on a proposition that a further levy should be raised? Will they have exemption from that levy? If they do, they will, of course, have no reason not to vote yes on a particular proposition. The reason that I ask that question is that clause 6(2) states:

"When submitting BID proposals to the district council, those who have drawn up the proposals are also to submit a statement as to which eligible ratepayers are to be entitled to vote in the ballot."

Therefore, they make the selection of who will vote in the ballot. It might be a very attractive proposition for politicians to be able to select who may vote in a ballot. However, we are saying here that the proponents of the proposition shall select who will be eligible to vote.

Clause 6(3) is the one that puzzles me a little bit. It states:

"A person is an eligible ratepayer if on the prescribed date that person is chargeable to rates in respect of relevant property."

What does the phrase "chargeable to rates" mean precisely? Does it mean that they are physically paying the rates or does it include a business that has an exemption from rates because it is a charity? That is why I ask whether charity occupiers, who are not ratepayers in the accepted sense, have a vote on the proposals. Will they ultimately be required to pay the levy or will the exemptions that apply to them in rates collection also apply to the collection of the levy? No doubt we will be told that all those things will become clear in the regulations. However, I think that the House should be interested enough to know what is in the Minister's mind and why those details are not in the Bill.

I will now turn to things that are not in the Bill. Clause 9(3) drew my attention. It states:

"The council may veto proposals only in prescribed circumstances".

Surely we need some guidance and framework in the Bill for how and when that could be exercised. We need some indication of criteria. It is not good enough to leave a blanket power

that says that councils can veto a proposition without the basis upon which they can veto at least being sketched out in the Bill. Could that not be done?

Again, when it comes to clause 10, which deals with articulating grounds for appeal, where a district council has vetoed something and the proposers want to appeal that veto to the Department, there is a blank canvas with no indication of what the grounds would be for appeal or anything else.

So, although I am not at all saying that there are not merits in business improvement districts and levies, there are so many unanswered questions to which we need to hear the answers so that we can see whether this is a genuine and fair proposition that will help to rejuvenate our town centres and key marketing streets. Is all that still up in the air because it remains with the regulations that we have not seen and do not have to see, in the sense that they will be subject to negative resolution? Therefore, are we being invited to sign a significant blank cheque for the Bill, whatever the good motivation behind it?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate for their remarks. If my response does not address any specific points, I am happy to write to the Members concerned separately.

The Business Improvement Districts Bill is an important part of the Government's response to the straitened economic times in which we continue to live. It is an opportunity for traders to help themselves by identifying and funding the services that their area needs to become more attractive to consumers. The Bill will ensure that all those whose businesses fall within a proposed BID area will be able to vote for the proposals and will be required by law to pay the BID levy if it has been approved by ballot.

The Bill allows for flexibility so that local solutions can be developed to tackle local issues. It will not involve a great deal of prescriptive rules from central government. Our towns and cities have a unique character, and a one-size-fits-all approach will simply not work. BIDs will be business led and not central or local government led. I am therefore asking for your support for the Second Stage of the Bill so that it can be sent to the Social Development Committee for more detailed scrutiny.

I will now turn to some of the issues that were raised during the debate. The Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, Alex

Maskey, mentioned a number of issues that that Committee wants clarification on. I will certainly consider all the issues that members raise during Committee Stage. I hope that the Bill receives the fullest possible scrutiny and that members' input will help to shape how we move forward. Together, we can ensure that the Bill fully meets the needs of all the stakeholders.

The Chairperson also asked about start-up funding for those who wish to start up a BID. Some consultation responses indicated that grant funding should be available for those wishing to start up a BID. However, the practice in most other jurisdictions is that no start-up grant funding is available. In some other areas, upfront BID development costs are borne by the private sector and can be recovered when the BID has been established. That provides a useful test of local business intent. However, local businesses and BID proposers are free to apply to other sources, such as European funds, to secure a grant towards the start-up costs should they so wish. I will look closely at what is happening in other areas before finalising the arrangements here.

Paula Bradley asked about the impact on rates. Although the BID levy is based on the rateable value of a business, it should not be viewed as an increase on its rates. Instead, it should be seen as an investment, made by businesses for businesses, to improve their local trading environment.

Mark Durkan said that businesses may have to pay for services that they do not want or cannot afford. The BID proposal will specify the additional services for which the money raised by the levy will be used. This will vary from BID to BID, and is not specified by legislation. However, examples of what the money might be used for include marketing, promotion of the area, staging of special events, CCTV or waste disposal services. Those services will have to be agreed by businesses as those which will be of benefit to them, and it is unlikely that businesses will vote in support of a proposal that they feel is of no benefit to them.

Sandra Overend asked why it is taking so long to put this legislation in place. When I took office in May 2011, one of my first actions was to review the outcome of the public consultation and decide on the way forward. This involved finalising the policy, briefing the Social Development Committee and seeking Executive agreement to draft the necessary legislation. Following the resolution of a number of issues, the Business Improvement Districts Bill was introduced to the Assembly on

25 June. Subject to the speed of the legislation through the Assembly Standing Orders process, the Department aims to have the primary legislation in place by the end of this year. This will be followed by secondary legislation and guidance from the Department. Therefore, the Department has indeed been taking the legislation forward as a priority and as quickly as possible.

Michael Copeland asked whether the levy would replace public funding in other areas. The BID proposal will specify the additional services for which the money raised by the levy will be used. This will vary from BID to BID, and is not specified by legislation. However, I have already given examples of what the money might be used for, and this is over and above other public investment. The levy will be ring-fenced and can be spent only on services in the BID area. Several Members raised the issue of start-up funding, and I have already dealt with that.

Sandra Overend also asked for assurance that businesses will not be hit by excessive regulation. This legislation is very flexible, so local businesses can adapt it to suit their particular local needs. It is, essentially, a piece of enabling legislation, which will provide a framework for businesses to help themselves. Alastair Ross asked whether BIDs could work in all towns and cities. The answer to that is yes. If business owners in the proposed BID area in that town or city can reach a consensus on which additional services it would be beneficial to fund, and agree to fund them, it can go ahead. As I have mentioned, the fact is that 90% of the BIDs that have come up for renewal have been renewed. That shows that BIDs work in the significant majority of cases elsewhere, and I believe that Northern Ireland will be no different. However, BIDs may not be suitable for every area, and that is a matter that will lie with the businesses in that area.

Jim Allister told us that he was generally supportive of the concept. At least I think that that is what he said, because he then proceeded to interrogate and find every possible obstacle that he could possibly imagine. I would hate to see him on a bad day, when he is depressed. If this was a good day, he could find plenty to complain about. I see that he is smiling now, so he is obviously in a good mood. I do not want to see him on a bad day.

He raised a number of points. He asked why there is so much that will be included in the secondary legislation. The intention is to make the legislation, including the secondary

legislation, as flexible as possible to allow the businesses to decide for themselves whether to proceed. Also, because a lot of the details to be included in the regulations are simply administrative, secondary legislation is largely considered the appropriate vehicle. He spoke about the DSD contribution. The point of BIDs is that they are business led, not government led. This is a tool for businesses to help themselves. BID proposers cannot simply decide that any given public body will provide funding without that body's agreement. However, BID proposers are entirely welcome to apply for other sources of funding, whether that be council grants, if available, or EU funding. Indeed, Ballymena Borough Council in his constituency has already done that. Those are just examples of what can be done.

4.45 pm

I will touch on the wider issue that he raised in his question. He asked whether DSD was almost shirking its responsibility and not stepping up to the mark. DSD is very committed, as I am personally, to our town and city centres. In the past week, I have visited town centres in Portadown and Lurgan to see the ongoing public realm work there, and I recently visited a town centre — sorry, city centre; I need to be careful about that — in Newry to see the ongoing public realm work there. In towns and cities across the Province, there is ongoing work to improve town centres. Through that public realm work, there have been major investments. For example, in Bangor, my Department is coming into partnership with the local authority. We are putting in £3 million and the local authority is putting in £5 million for a major investment in public realm in the centre of that town.

So, through that work and our ongoing work in response to the Mary Portas document in Great Britain, we have been meeting businesses right across the Province and producing a follow-up local report to look at what can be done to support our town centres. A huge amount of work is being done, and that is getting a positive response from all the representative bodies for local traders. I hope that that addresses Mr Allister's point and reassures him of our full and total commitment to town centres right across the Province.

He raised a question about the 25% turnout in the ballot. That is the same threshold as in Scotland; in England and Wales, no minimum turnout is specified. So, we have taken the example from our kith and kin across the water in Scotland and gone for the 25%. He asked whether people will turn out to vote. I have

more faith in our local traders and local businesses, because those folk will look carefully at money matters and realise that it is important for them to express their view and have their say.

Mr Humphrey: Especially in Ballymena.

Mr McCausland: My colleague to the left says "especially in Ballymena". Those traders will make sure that they turn out for that vote and express their view. I have every confidence that they will do that. In circumstances where the property is sold, the new tenant owner will be responsible for the levy and will know that when purchasing the property or taking it up.

Mr Allister asked about eligible ratepayers and those who do not pay rates and what "chargeable to rates" means and whether it includes those who have rates exemptions. Rates exemptions do not automatically carry forward. For example, charities have an exemption from paying rates, but there is an underlying rates liability on which the BID levy will be based, and the BID proposer can decide on any exemptions, in which case there may not be many.

I will review the report of today's session carefully, and, if my response does not address any specific point, I will be happy to do that, and I commend the Bill to you for the Assembly's approval.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Business Improvement Districts Bill [NIA 9/11-15] be agreed.

Committee Business

Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 26 October 2012 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill (NIA Bill 7/11-15).

The Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill passed its Second Stage on 25 June 2012 and was referred to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the same day. The Bill will establish an inquiry into institutional abuse between 1945 and 1995, and its terms of reference were set out in a written statement to the Assembly on 31 May 2012. The Bill is relatively short, with only 23 clauses.

I will now detail the Committee's consideration of the Bill so far. The Committee was briefed by departmental officials on 26 June 2012 on the consultation that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) carried out, in preparation for this inquiry, and on the drafting of the Bill. Then, on 4 July, the chairperson of the inquiry, Sir Anthony Hart, briefed the Committee on the Bill. The Committee looks forward to further engagement with the Department and with Sir Anthony Hart, further to the Committee's evidence sessions. The Committee has also written to key stakeholders, seeking their comments on the Bill, and an advert was placed in local newspapers inviting such comments. So far, 15 responses have been received, raising a number of significant issues.

Much work has clearly gone into the Bill by the Department, but a number of concerns have been raised. The 1945 start date for the inquiry's panel investigation was a key concern of many organisations, as it excludes victims for whom abuse ceased before 1945. The Human Rights Commission is also of the view that the Bill does not currently meet the required level of protection under the European Convention on Human Rights. However, the chief commissioner emphasised that the Bill can be amended to give the required level of protection.

On 12 September, the Committee heard from Amnesty International UK, Victim Support, the NEXUS Institute, Contact NI and Ciaran McAteer and Co Solicitors, all of whom favoured including the terms of reference in the Bill rather than in the ministerial statement, and having some form of control in relation to OFMDFM's power to amend the terms of reference. Concern has also been raised as to how the rights of victims of non-institutional clerical abuse are to be met.

In order to allow time to hear all the evidence and raise those concerns with the Department, the Committee has agreed to seek a short extension of its scrutiny of the Bill until 26 October. Committee members are however acutely aware of the importance of this inquiry and the Bill to victims and survivors. Countless individuals have campaigned long and hard to ensure that this inquiry takes place. Therefore, it is essential that our Committee ensures that the Bill is both fit for purpose and that it is progressed as quickly as possible. For that reason, the Committee unanimously agreed that only a short extension of the Committee Stage would be sought, and it is fully committed to work with the Department to meet its target for Royal Assent.

We are keen to encourage members of the public, victims and survivors to follow the Bill's progress. Committee evidence sessions can be watched live on the Assembly website. DVDs and CDs of the sessions can also be requested online. The Bill, the ministerial statement, which contains the inquiry's terms of reference and related documents — as well as the Official Report of the Committee sessions on the Bill — can be found on the Committee's pages on the Assembly website.

We hope that, over the coming weeks, we can work with the Department and bring forward the necessary amendments to ensure that this Bill is the best it can be for victims and survivors of institutional abuse. I ask the House to support the motion. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 26 October 2012 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Bill (NIA Bill 7/11-15).

Private Members' Business

Tourism: Visas

Mr Principal 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 to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are selected to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the success of the Dublin Government's short-stay visa waiver scheme allowing visitors here from 16 emerging tourism markets to travel around the rest of the island without the need for an additional visa application; recognises the potential that a reciprocal approach would have in opening up our tourism industry to new markets; notes, with concern, the British Government's position of preventing the introduction of a similar scheme; and calls for the introduction of a single visa scheme for visitors to the island of Ireland.

I thank the Minister for taking time out of what will be a very busy week for her to come and listen to the debate, and respond to it. I am grateful that she is here for that. As the Minister has constantly reminded us, running through the Programme for Government is the theme of growing our economy and, in particular, our tourism industry. It is one of the Executive's key priorities in the coming years, which is evident through the recent significant funding that has been provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for infrastructural development and marketing. In this year alone, the Programme for Government sets an ambitious target of growing overseas visitor numbers to 3.47 million for the 2012-13 year, as well as increasing tourism revenue to £591 million. Those are ambitious and challenging targets. In order to meet those targets, we need to make it as attractive as possible for people who are thinking about taking a holiday and as easy as possible for those considering visiting here, while retaining an acceptable level of security checks and ensuring that they are in place.

Let me state clearly that I am not particularly exercised about how the scheme is administered. I am relaxed about whether it would operate solely on the island of Ireland or whether there would be a single visa for the island of Ireland, Britain, the Isle of Man and the

Channel Islands. For me, that is not the big issue. My primary issue is that many people fly into airports around the island of Ireland but have no visa to come to the North. That is a major barrier to the development of our tourism industry and our potential to attract foreign direct investment into this part of the island. If a businessperson travelling from Dubai, for example, wanted to come to Belfast, the easiest way would be to fly into Dublin and then come up the road to Belfast. However, to do so, such a person would need two visas. If people were considering locating a part of their business here, would they really be willing to go through that additional bureaucracy every time they wanted to travel? My concern is that, if people have to go to the hassle of applying for a second visa and all the additional work that that involves, it could put them off visiting this part of the island.

A short-stay visa waiver scheme has been in operation in the South since July 2011. It was introduced as one of a number of measures that the Dublin Government brought forward through its jobs plan. Visitors from China, India, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Ukraine, Belarus, Montenegro, Serbia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are all eligible for the scheme — I might get a job as a weather broadcaster next. Ultimately, this is a cost-neutral exercise, and as the level of security checks required for a visa here are higher than those in the South, there were no additional security implications. However, problems arose when discussions took place about a reciprocal approach, and to date the British Government have been reluctant to agree such a scheme because they cannot get an agreement with the Dublin Government over the additional required security checks.

In previous responses to questions, Minister Foster has been quite receptive to a reciprocal arrangement for a short-stay visa waiver scheme and stated to me in the Chamber on 14 February:

"It is an issue, and I would like to see it sorted out, but it is a difficult one." [Official Report, Vol 72, No 4, p227, col 2].

I hope that that positive approach remains, despite the fact that there has not been any progress to date. I note that the Minister has raised it with the Minister of State in the past.

Many people in the Asian market are only beginning to take notice of Ireland as a potential tourism destination and to consider coming to the island. That is down to the good work of

our tourism promotion agencies in promoting the island across the world in positive terms. The Asian market accounts for around one third of the global tourism spend, and it is growing year on year. It is crucial that any barriers identified to growing our tourism sector that are inhibiting our potential are overcome. In the House, I previously outlined my view that tourists travelling from far-flung corners of the world would be discouraged from spending two weeks solely in the North of Ireland and that more needs to be done to promote the island as a whole as a single tourism destination, otherwise there is a chance that they will go elsewhere. As a wise man once said, "Half a loaf is better than no bread at all." One of our regional papers took great umbrage at that suggestion the last time I made it and went to the trouble of producing a full-page spread on how someone could spend a fortnight travelling throughout the Six Counties. In truth, all the activities that it outlined could easily be undertaken in five days.

We need to offer people the chance of a once-in-a-lifetime holiday with positive memories that will remain. Imagine how much easier it would be to attract Asian visitors if we could promote the Giant's Causeway, Titanic Belfast, the lakes of Fermanagh, Dublin city, Connemara and the Ring of Kerry as a single product with only one visa required. In my view, such a holiday would be much more attractive because of the breadth of destinations and activities on offer.

5.00 pm

Mr Newton: I want to take issue with a part of the motion. I accept that one could have some sympathy with the motion, but I take issue with the part of the motion that states that the Assembly:

"notes, with concern, the British Government's position of preventing the introduction of a similar scheme; and calls for the introduction of a single visa scheme for visitors to the island of Ireland."

I note that the proposer indicated that he is not concerned about how a scheme might operate or how it is implemented. That is not the big issue for him.

I want to look back on the reason for the introduction of the visa. It was introduced for the benefit of tourism, and the benefits are recognised. It gives visitors to the Republic of Ireland the potential to hold a visa for entry into the UK. Consequently, if nationals from the listed countries that the Member read out arrive

in the UK with a valid UK visa, they will be allowed to travel throughout the whole of Ireland — Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland — without any further documentation. That is a good arrangement. The Republic of Ireland would benefit from that, and they would know that appropriate security checks had been put in place. That is one of the difficulties, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and Sinn Féin knows that. It has asked a number of questions. Mr Molloy — you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — asked a question, and the Minister replied to you indicating that the Irish Government needed to come up to the appropriate level of security for the UK. Mr Daithí McKay asked four questions on 15 February and another question on 27 February, all of which were around the same issue. Every answer indicated to Mr McKay that security was an issue. That being the case, any visitor who wants to travel in Northern Ireland and across the Republic of Ireland and wants to come to Dublin first needs to step up to the standards of the UK visa waiver scheme. Only by doing that can that be achieved. In the Minister's five or six answers to you, she indicated that work was under way in the area and that all the indications were that the UK and the Republic of Ireland were willing to explore the potential for a common visa. There can be no doubt that, if that were achieved, it would allow visitors who want to visit the Republic first to enjoy all the benefits of coming to the Republic and travelling into Northern Ireland and throughout GB. That must be an attraction, but it requires the Republic to step up to the mark on the security issues.

The Home Office has made it clear that it is not in a position to reciprocate on a request for the Irish waiver scheme at this time. I have already said what those problem are. It is, therefore, important for Sinn Féin and Dublin to consider upgrading the scheme. That must be in the interests of all of us. It must be in the interests of the Republic of Ireland Government and of the UK. If they can match the biometric checks in the UK waiver scheme, it would enable progress to be made. Surely, Sinn Féin has TDs in the Dáil who can raise the issue. They have MPs at Westminster who can raise the issue, if they are willing to take their seat. There are methods in the Republic, and there are methods in Westminster to allow them to take their seat, to use their influence, to operate through the Committees, to operate through debates, to operate through —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Newton: Rather than blame the British Government for the issue, the responsibility lies with Sinn Féin and the Dublin Government.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the House, although I think that it is bad timing. It has not been thought through, and there are probably more pressing matters that we should be discussing today. However, I very much welcome the idea that it is being brought forward. We should accept and welcome any initiative that helps to bring jobs to Northern Ireland. We need to learn from it and think our way through it so that we have as good and as all-encompassing a tourist initiative as we can. For example, we should target the Northern Irish people and the Ulster people around the UK and the rest of the world to get them to help us with our jobs. We should also support our airports here. All the way through the debate, the question at the back of my mind has been "Why would you fly to Dublin to come to Northern Ireland when you can fly straight to Belfast?". I go back to my point: if people were to fly to Belfast, they could get the visa and then go to Ireland afterwards. Therefore, we should look at having more flights to Northern Ireland. I have a sneaking feeling that we are probably losing quite a few jobs to Ireland in the meantime. Although we want to see jobs in Ireland, we want to see jobs in the North too.

We all agree that tourism is key to driving our economy, so maybe we should push for a reciprocal visa waiver scheme for Northern Ireland. Remember, we want more tourists here, and our economy should come first. The problem with looking at what we have been shown today is that there are no statistics to go by, there is no proof, we do not know the effects on jobs, and we do not know the numbers visiting. That is why I say that it is too early to have this debate. We need many more facts.

Alan Shatter indicated that the policy might become a fixture. If that is the case, why on earth are the Irish Government not resourcing it and stepping up to the mark as we have heard? Get them to find out the figures, get them to cost it and come forward, so that the onus is on the Irish Government. The motion implies that Britain is blocking this. It needs better security, but it is not blocking it. It just needs the Irish to resource it better. As we can see from one of the reports, Ireland needs a good fingerprint biometric system that fits, and then we can move forward. Our Minister here has been talking to Minister Swire, and, no doubt, she will raise it again with Minister Penning. When she speaks at the end of the debate, I would like to

know whether we have to start again or can just carry on from where we are.

I feel that a large point behind today's debate is just political to try again to go for a united Ireland, but let us get back to the key point, which is tourism. Let us get back to how well the United Kingdom has done. Just remember that the jubilee and the Olympics probably brought masses of people to the UK and Ireland this year. If the Irish want to go that way, let us get them back into the Commonwealth and maybe even get them back into joining us in the United Kingdom. We oppose the motion.

Ms Lo: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I have just come back from a week in Sri Lanka, where I attended a Commonwealth conference of parliamentarians. We all got together, and it has to be said that we are very well recognised for our efforts in overcoming the Troubles. However, we are much less well known for our tourism potential.

Since the waiver scheme was introduced in the Republic of Ireland, there has been a reported increase in demand from tour operators. I am confident that we will see similar results with the recent development of the Titanic museum, the new Giant's Causeway visitor centre, the Lyric Theatre and the Mac. We are actively paving the way for more tourism. By regenerating our cultural heritage with world-class attractions, we are proving how far we have come, and we should make that message heard.

We have seen unprecedented interest in Northern Ireland as a golf tourism destination, which is a niche market that we should capitalise on. Similarly, with more filming projects located here, people want to see our unique natural environment. Any lost income from visa fees will, no doubt, be compensated by increased tourist spending.

Over the years, I have known the problems of non-nationals, be they students, foreign workers or tourists, who have a visa only for the UK but want to cross the border to the South of Ireland. Last month, my constituency staff and I were frantically involved in helping some young people from South Africa who had been invited to visit Belfast for two weeks. They flew into Dublin Airport, because that was the only way or perhaps the cheapest way to get here, not realising that they would need a separate visa to come to Northern Ireland. They had only two weeks, but we managed, with great urgency and difficulty, to help them obtain the right visas. With the Republic of Ireland having a short-term visa waiver scheme, it is unfortunate,

not to mention confusing, for visitors that we do not have reciprocal measures.

The introduction of a visa waiver programme is beneficial in attracting tourism from emerging markets. It is an investment issue too, as we should make it easy for investors to come to Northern Ireland. Last October, I had a meeting with the CEO of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, who highlighted his disappointment that Britain and Ireland are not included in the Schengen Agreement. As you will be aware, the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty set up the Schengen zone, which allows tourists visiting participating states to travel freely between other participating states with one visa application. Chinese visitors often avail themselves of the system when coming to Europe and only visit countries in the zone. As the UK is not in the zone, this area is often excluded from European holiday plans. Other Chinese travel agents have talked to me about that, and I think that I have written to the Minister about it as well. Apparently, by 2020, China expects over one million long-haul outbound international tourists a month. Coupled with that, China now has more millionaires than the population of Northern Ireland. It would be foolish not to take advantage of this opportunity for high-end tourism. A visa waiver programme similar to the Republic, while not as beneficial as an extension of the Schengen Agreement, would help to promote tourism here, but I know that that is a matter for Westminster.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. We all know that there is a need to encourage and build on our tourism figures and to improve the ease of business travel, particularly in today's economic climate. I am aware that the scheme operated by the Dublin Government, which is referred to in the motion, has worked well. In a nutshell, it allows people from 16 countries who have obtained a UK visa to travel freely to the Republic of Ireland without having to complete a further visa application. However, they must arrive in the UK before being allowed to do so. That allows ease of travel and cuts down bureaucracy, particularly for the Dublin Government, as all the checks are carried out by the UK Government. I have always been an advocate of cutting down bureaucracy wherever possible but not until the Irish Government have improved their visa checks and security.

I am aware that Minister Foster has been working on the matter and has raised it with Her Majesty's Government and the Dublin Government. In fact, Minister Foster advised the House, in answer to a question asked in

April this year, that she had discussed it with Hugo Swire and that, at the time, there were security and resource implications that prevented the introduction of such a scheme. As I intimated previously, the main difference is the biometric requirement as required by our UK Government. Presently, the Republic of Ireland does not have the capacity to capture such data. For UK visas, this is done in over 150 countries, which means that the UK will in no way put the country's safety in jeopardy by implementing a reciprocal waiver scheme that is not as foolproof as the one it implements. At present, the onus is very much on the Dublin Government to set the wheels in motion to upgrade and tighten their checks and implement the biometrics element of the visa applications. Following that, further work can be done to develop such a scheme.

5.15 pm

Although, I would like to see a reciprocal scheme, I in no way want to see a jeopardising of safety and security when dealing with visa applications and checks. It is of the utmost importance that all necessary checks are completed and that, if any reciprocal scheme is implemented, it does not reduce or diminish the stringent rules and regulations associated with it, given the safety concerns that unfortunately all too often come to the fore.

Although progress on this matter does not lie at the feet of the Minister directly, I know she will continue to lobby for the implementation of such a scheme. I ask that she keeps the House apprised of the matter. However, I would like to condemn — commend her for the many schemes that she has been enacting and implementing in a bid to increase tourism potential and improve and ease the cost of travel for business persons.

In summary, I would like to condemn — [*Laughter.*] — commend the Minister again — sorry, I have condemned her twice — for her interest in this matter.

Mr Allister: You can come over here.

Mr Moutray: That is an offer I will refuse. I call on the Irish Government to take action in dealing with this. The onus on this occasion is on them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Ms Maeve McLaughlin, I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech is made without interruptions.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank you and the wider Assembly staff for the support they have shown me and my colleagues over recent weeks. I look forward to replacing Martina Anderson, and I want to formally record the role that she played in the Assembly in standing up for Derry and the wider north-west. I wish her every success in her new role as an MEP.

I support the motion welcoming the success of the Dublin Government's short-stay visa waiver scheme, and I call for the introduction of that single visa scheme for the island of Ireland. I have always viewed tourism as a key economic driver. In my constituency, our river and walls, the gateway to Donegal and our recent history and the concept of political tourism should not be underestimated. People arrive on our streets and to other parts of the North on a daily basis to hear our stories and to visit our monuments, murals and iconic monuments, such as Free Derry corner.

In our current economic climate, we need and have the opportunity to raise our game. Derry's One Plan, endorsed by the Assembly and contained in the Programme for Government, has recognised the economic impact of tourism on regeneration. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has committed to increasing visitor numbers to 4.2 million, with a tourism revenue of £6.76 million by 2014. The year 2013 provides us with many opportunities to market and invest in the island of Ireland with events such as "The Gathering", the City of Culture and the Fleadh Cheoil, to name but a few. A total of £39.5 million was generated for the Cavan economy last year as a result of the Fleadh Cheoil. Those benefits should not be prohibited by a double visa system on this island. Since the introduction of the Dublin visa system, business people from 16 countries have been able to travel through Ireland without the need for a separate visa. The scheme has now been extended for four years. Put simply, it is joined-up government in action, and I call on the Department here to lobby for its implementation.

The Assembly needs to help one of our major employers up off their knees. I listened carefully to other comments on statistics. Tourism Ireland has indicated that, since the scheme's inception, the number of tourists from China has more than doubled from July to August 2011. A number of new operator and travel agent itineraries have been created as a result of the programming, including nine new tour operator itineraries from China and 10 from India. Media articles generated by the

programme in the target markets amounted to £0.6 million worth of advertising, and there was online communication on the programme to over 800,000 customers and members of the trade.

Why do we need two visa systems to enter the North of Ireland? I do not accept that resource and security arrangements are an obstacle, as has been presented here today and by the British Government. In Dublin, the loss of visa revenue has been well outweighed by increased visitor numbers. As a result of the scheme, 24 new tour operators are programming 26 countries for the first time in 2012, and there is evidence of increased interest in Ireland from individual travellers from those markets. Tourism Ireland is targeting that demographic by highlighting the new short-stay visas.

In 2011, Tourism Ireland indicated that 19,000 Indian tourists would arrive in Dublin, and the Twenty-six Counties Minister stated that 30,000 visitors from targeted countries came to Ireland in 2010. Of the visitors who come to my constituency in the city of Derry, 63% fly through Dublin. Air access and visas remain big issues for this island. Ireland is marketed jointly across the globe, and, given that the island is less than 400 miles long —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: — it is common sense that people who travel to the South should be encouraged north. The introduction of a single visa scheme makes sense and would increase visitor numbers to this island.

Mr Frew: I oppose the motion. There is a responsibility on us all to try to increase the footfall of visitors who come to our Province and country. It is incumbent on us all to try to increase those figures and enhance Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. We must do that in whatever we can and use whatever tools we can. However, we must always be mindful of the implications and indirect actions that can arise from those actions and the motions we put forward. By Mr Flanagan's own admission, he does not care or know what processes would have to be put in place to make this work. However, we have a motion in front of us, we are debating the issue and, if we do not have that level of detail, the House will lose credibility on the issue.

We would love to see more people coming to Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland and the

British Isles. That is my point. Once again, Sinn Féin and its lead cheerperson or spokesperson, Mr Flanagan, have belittled Northern Ireland. Only a matter of months ago, Mr Flanagan stated that he could not see how anyone could spend two weeks in his constituency. That is a terrible thing to say about Fermanagh and South Tyrone or anywhere else in Northern Ireland. I believe that you could spend a good two weeks visiting North Antrim, and he should feel the same about his constituency. Again, Sinn Féin has belittled the tourist potential of Northern Ireland. If this debate is going out wide, people will hear that, and that is a bad thing for the world to hear.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way, and I appreciate what he is trying to do. He made two comments, and I will try to deal with them fairly quickly.

Never, at any stage, did I suggest that I did not know or care how the system would operate. I said that I was not exercised about whether it would operate solely on the island of Ireland or incorporate the island of Britain, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Those are two separate issues. I have never dismissed the fact that the problem is that the Dublin Government need to bring their security standards up to the par that the British Government demand. That is fairly simple. The rationale behind that is clear-cut, and I have no problems with it.

Mr Frew comments that I do not envisage how anyone could spend two weeks in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I think you are paraphrasing a bit there. What I said was that I do not think that it is very attractive for people coming on long-haul holidays to spend two weeks in the Six Counties; they would much prefer to be given a wider access to go to see more things. That was the point that I made. It was not that you could not spend two weeks in Fermanagh. You could very easily do so, but we need to offer a wider range of activities for people.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank Mr Flanagan for clarifying that. He has clarified it perfectly, at least in relation to the point that I made earlier about it not being attractive to come to Northern Ireland for two weeks. That is mind-numbing, to be honest. He leads on to a very good point. If the Republic of Ireland will not put the money into the security measures that need to be put

in place to enhance the safety of all of us in the British Isles, it should at least educate the world and the potential tourists that would come to this part of the world that, if they get a UK visa, they are able to travel freely across the British Isles and go everywhere. In fact, that is the point that I would like to make.

We have Sinn Féin people saying to us, even today in this debate, that Northern Ireland is too small for a tourist destination. I would say that Ireland could be classed as too small for a tourist destination. Why not widen it out to the British Isles and come into a far greater and bigger market? There is something to be said about tourists coming to these islands knowing full well that their safety is paramount. Nothing will turn off tourists more — we have seen it for decades here in Northern Ireland — than the fact that the country they are going to travel to is dangerous or not safe. It is important that the Assembly puts pressure on the Irish Government to increase security and bring fingerprinting technology into their border controls, which will tighten up everything to do with security on the British Isles. That is what the motion should really say. That is what the motion should be driving at. There is no doubt about it.

We have a great tourist potential here in Northern Ireland. We have a great marketing tool. We have the Giant's Causeway, with its new visitor centre, the Fermanagh lakes and the Mourne mountains. We have everything going for this wee country for tourism. We need to embrace that, encourage it and do as much as we can to enhance that. Trading us within the British Isles, with us as the jewel in the crown of the British Isles, will go some way towards attracting people from all over the world to come to Northern Ireland.

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

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. My main interest in the motion is the tourism aspect. We know that tourism is a key driver of the economy, and we are all well aware of the benefits that overseas tourists bring. It is frustrating, however, that this afternoon we have a motion from Sinn Féin on visas as opposed to debating the more relevant and recent issues on the economy; namely, how to mitigate the job losses of last week. However, I must restrict my comments to the short-stay waiver scheme in operation in the Republic of Ireland. I have just a few points to make on that.

The background to the scheme in the Republic is fairly simple. As the proposer said, it has

been running since July 2011 and means that people who meet certain criteria — such as if they are nationals of one of the 16 countries covered by the scheme; if they have entered the UK on foot of a UK C general visa; or if they have been granted leave to remain in the UK for up to 180 days — can travel to Ireland within the time remaining on a current leave to remain in the UK without the need for an Irish visa and be granted permission to remain in the Republic of Ireland for a maximum of 90 days or the time left on their UK leave to remain, whichever is shorter. I know that the scheme has been subsequently amended to include Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as residents of countries in the Schengen area. At this stage, I point out that the thinking behind the timing of the scheme was to take advantage of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Given that it has been extended, the scheme must be considered to be of some worth to the Republic of Ireland.

As my colleague Mr Kinahan said, the motion comes before us today because there is no reciprocal arrangement as regards the UK. However, the reasoning behind changing that at present is difficult for a number of reasons.

5.30 pm

First, neither the Justice Minister, Alan Shatter, nor the Irish Government are able to say exactly how many people have availed themselves of the scheme thus far. It is, therefore, wholly impossible to quantify exactly how effective the scheme has been or whether it has boosted the Irish economy significantly through increased tourism. Secondly, the cost of lost visa fee revenue would need to be looked at. The Irish Government have outlined a figure of €1 million, but we have no reliable calculations of the cost to the UK Government or to the Northern Ireland block grant. I would welcome more information on that.

Mr Flanagan: The Member said that one reason that she will not support the motion is because there are not enough facts on how many people have benefited from it. However, it is quite a simple calculation: if the Government state that €1 million has been lost through visa applications, if you simply divide that by the cost of a visa application, it will give you the number of people who have claimed.

Mrs Overend: I wish it were that easy, right enough.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that people from all the countries eligible under the Irish visa scheme are quite able to come to Northern

Ireland using a UK passport. I do not think that we should paint the picture that we are losing out on vast amounts of tourism as a result of not having a waiver in place.

The final issue is security, and I note that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has also highlighted that as a concern in her answers to an earlier question for oral answer. In that respect, I agree with the Minister that the ball is in the Irish Government's court: they will have to come up with the appropriate level of security for the UK. That would have resource implications, and we all know that budget reductions in the Republic are substantial. I agree with a reciprocal scheme being put in place in Northern Ireland if the issues that I have referred to could be sorted out. However, the Sinn Féin motion concludes by calling for the introduction of a single visa scheme for the island of Ireland, and as Northern Ireland is obviously part of the United Kingdom, that is not going to happen.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le Sinn Féin as ucht an moladh a chur os ár gcomhair. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing the subject to our attention today. I presume that it will be a temporary measure lasting for three years and 105 days if we are to believe the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, who says that we will be one jurisdiction by 2016. *[Laughter.]* I do not see an awful lot of worry about that on the far side of the Chamber, but we will go by what the man says, because he is the man. However, the SDLP supports the motion.

Owing to the Irish Government's assessment of the success of the short-stay visa waiver scheme, it has been extended to cover Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Mrs Overend has pointed out, as well as the original 16 countries, so 17 countries are now covered. It is also worth nothing that, in essence, the scheme provides for the proposed single visa scheme for visitors to the island of Ireland as long as they arrive in the North first and have a UK multi-entry visa. As such, the four-year extension to the scheme that was announced in March this year is also to be welcomed. Allowing all visitors on short-stay visas to travel freely across this island would bring benefits. There is no disputing that. However, the extent to which we are missing out owing to the lack of a reciprocal scheme is not entirely clear. Perhaps those who tabled the motion have some facts and figures to hand to supplement that.

Let us be honest about the current barriers to a single visa scheme, rather than simply blame

the British Government for preventing the introduction of a similar scheme. As the Irish Minister for Justice and Equality and Minister for Defence, Alan Shatter, has already pointed out to the Dáil, the lack of a reciprocal scheme is for technical reasons. The UK Government require all visa applicants from over 150 countries to supply fingerprint and biometric data electronically. The Irish Government do not, and they acknowledge that they lack the capacity to do so. Decisions on the requirements for visa applications are a matter for both Governments.

As the party to my right knows, the UK Government have what they would consider to be sensitive security installations in the North: MI5 has not gone away, you know. However, the current arrangements appear to be unenforceable. Unless the UK Government reinstate border checkpoints on this island, which I hope that they are not going to do, there is no practical way to detect Irish visa holders who are travelling freely across the island in breach of that visa. The only reported breaches of an Irish visa that I recall involved visitors who travelled from Ireland to Britain via a seaport and who were detected as they attempted to re-enter the island of Ireland. So, there is a question mark over the practical value of such apparent travel restrictions on the island. It is a fact that both Governments are committed to developing a common travel area — CTA — visa that would allow tourists and business visitors to travel to the CTA, permitting them to travel freely across and between the islands of Britain and Ireland. That is surely the way forward, and the Assembly should encourage both Governments to make progress on a CTA visa.

We believe that the proposal before us has some merit. An official reciprocal visa waiver scheme to allow visitors to the South to travel freely across the island would certainly benefit our tourism sector. There is no doubt about that. It could play a part in helping to promote this island as a tourist destination globally. That makes practical and good common sense. Until a CTA visa is agreed, however, the UK Border Agency could be tasked with checking visiting visa holders leaving the island of Ireland to ensure that they are not in breach of any travel restrictions. Such an agreement would recognise the realities on the ground. In the meantime, both Governments should continue to work towards their proposed trial CTA visa scheme and co-operate to resolve the practical issues around its introduction. A united call from the Assembly in support of this proposal would be a welcome sign that the economic

benefits of practical policies are finally beginning to trump tribal gesturing.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Maximising the opportunities for travel and tourism into Northern Ireland is an important issue that, quite rightly, continues to be a top priority for our Executive and Assembly. Indeed, I put on record a word of thanks to my colleague Minister Arlene Foster for all the work that she has done to date to boost tourism and to bring in new tourism markets from around the world.

It is evident that the short-stay visa waiver system has been of benefit to the Republic in persuading tourists from the 16 emerging markets who are visiting the mainland to visit the Republic of Ireland. The waiver system has facilitated an increase in tourism in the Republic, and I agree that we should consider all viable options for maximising visitor opportunities. Visitors who come to the Republic of Ireland through the visa waiver scheme on a UK visa are able to visit Northern Ireland, which is something that we would encourage and build upon.

It is right to recognise that a considerable number of visitors to Northern Ireland travel up from the Irish Republic. Unfortunately, current security and resource limitations make it impossible to have a reciprocal visa waiver scheme in Northern Ireland at the minute. I hope that we will continue to see progress on resolving these issues in the near future. We look forward to seeing tourism figures in the months and years ahead and trust that we will see a continuing improvement, with Northern Ireland showcased around the world as an attractive product and a must-see destination.

In ventures such as ni2012: Our Time Our Place, which incorporates the Titanic signature project and the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, we now have a world-class brand to promote on the world stage. Much good work is ongoing in encouraging overseas tourists to Northern Ireland, particularly through the positive campaigns from Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. It is our job to ensure that Northern Ireland is known around the world to be open for business, and we must continue to ensure that all avenues are fully explored in selling Northern Ireland as a place to visit and to do business.

I welcome the work that has been done to date to promote Northern Ireland. I trust that that good work will continue and that we will see progress in making the place as accessible as possible. I oppose the motion.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue, which, as has been mentioned, has been raised in the House on a number of occasions. It is good to discuss the issue again.

I think that it will be helpful if I clarify the terms of the Republic of Ireland visa waiver scheme. At present, it covers 16 countries, as we have heard, and it was to run until this year but has been extended to October 2016. As has, rightly, been said, it now includes Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It was introduced with the intention of attracting visitors to Ireland who hold a valid visa for entry to the UK. Consequently, if nationals of certain countries, such as China, arrive in the UK with a valid UK visa, that visa is recognised by the Republic of Ireland, so they can travel to and enter the Republic of Ireland without any further documentation. However, for the visa waiver to operate, the visitor must enter the UK first to have that visa validated, and, therefore, for all those who enter the Republic of Ireland under the visa waiver scheme there are no restrictions to further travel to Northern Ireland, as they already hold a valid UK visa.

Those who travel directly to the Republic of Ireland on an Irish visa, of course, cannot enter Northern Ireland without a valid UK visa. This is an issue that I have been aware of, and I have, on a number of occasions, discussed with Her Majesty's Government the potential for a reciprocal visa waiver scheme. Both Governments are committed to working on this issue.

I think that it was Mr McGlone who mentioned the common travel area. In December 2011, the UK and Irish Governments signed an agreement that, among other things, they are committed to exploring the feasibility of that common travel area visa. Such a visa would allow tourists and business visitors to travel to the common travel area and to travel freely between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is anticipated that such a visa will prove to be an attractive option. I have no doubt that that is the case for tourists and business visitors. However, the Home Office has made it very clear that it will not be in a position to reciprocate the visa waiver scheme at this time because a number of issues on how a reciprocal arrangement might work in practice need to be worked through, not least the security implications.

We can wave our hands and say: "That does not really matter, we need to have this visa

waiver scheme right now." I do not think that we should do that. We need to take account of our national security position, and I think that that is very much what the Home Office is doing.

Having discussed this with Minister Swire, it is clear that the security aspects of the Republic of Ireland visa system would need to be significantly upgraded before the UK would consider a visa waiver or, indeed, a common travel area visa. I think that it was Mr McGlone who asked whether I had had discussions with the new Minister of State. I hope to meet the new Minister of State tomorrow to discuss a wide range of issues, and I hope that we can continue the good work that we were able to progress on many fronts with Minister Swire.

I would like to think that most people in the Assembly will understand that, given the times in which we live, the Home Office will have to assure itself that all the proper systems are in place to protect the United Kingdom's national security. It is, therefore, for the Republic of Ireland Government to consider how it can update its immigration system to incorporate modern biometric checks to enable progress on what I accept is a very important issue.

I think that Mr Flanagan made the point that he did not mind how it was completed, he just wanted to see it happen. I understand his desire to see it happen, but the motion is somewhat flawed in that it calls on the British Government to take action, when, in fact, it is the Irish Government that need to take the action on this matter.

Leo Varadkar, my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, acknowledged, in his speech to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in May, that the current lack of biometric checks conducted by Irish immigration officers means that progress towards visa recognition across both jurisdictions will take a number of years.

5.45 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for giving way. Given what she has just said about all-party consensus on where the solution to the problem is — with the Irish Government — does she agree that it is somewhat ironic that it is the party with representation in that Parliament that raises it here rather than in the Parliament where the problem is?

Mrs Foster: I hope that whoever from Sinn Féin makes the winding-up speech on the motion may want to address that issue, which

could, I think, be addressed in the Dáil, and maybe we will hear whether that will be the case. I am aware that the Republic of Ireland is looking at options to upgrade its existing visa scheme, and we would very much welcome any progress.

We have been working hard to encourage visitors from further afield and emerging markets to visit Northern Ireland. It was, I think, Mr Kinahan who made the point that we want people to travel directly into our Northern Ireland airports. That is why we, along with Tourism Ireland, have been working with the airports and trying to encourage the areas that we are targeting for tourists to look at direct flights into Belfast International Airport or Belfast City Airport.

As you will be aware, we have secured the devolution of direct long-haul air passenger duty (APD). That very significant achievement by the Executive and Assembly will help to ensure that key business and tourism links with long-haul markets are maintained and, more importantly, built on. Good progress has been made on the devolution of direct long-haul APD. The Finance Act 2012 facilitated the transfer of the power to Northern Ireland, and a Bill to complete the final stages of that devolution will very shortly be introduced to the Assembly.

The Programme for Government commits us to setting a zero rate of APD on all direct long-haul flights, and I understand that it is the Executive's intention to progress the Bill through accelerated passage and introduce the zero rate with effect from 1 April next year. Devolving direct long-haul APD and reducing it to zero will send to other long-haul airlines the very positive message that Northern Ireland can be a viable option for their business. We want to encourage direct access to Northern Ireland from those markets. Visitors could then enter on a UK visa and, with the Republic of Ireland visa waiver scheme, travel freely into the Republic, if that is what they so desire.

I must take issue with Mr Flanagan's repeated comments. As he was speaking, I thought, when you are in a hole, stop digging. However, he continued to dig by saying that long-haul visitors would not want to spend two weeks in Northern Ireland. Such errant nonsense does a great disservice to our tourism industry, which has worked very hard with me, the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to sell, right across the world, the product that is Northern Ireland. I could go through the list of places to visit in Fermanagh, Belfast, County Down, Antrim, Tyrone or Londonderry. Of course, we also have Armagh and all our Christian heritage and

cathedrals. For goodness' sake, the United Kingdom City of Culture is coming here next year, and he says that people could not spend two weeks in Northern Ireland. I could very happily spend two weeks of my summer holiday in Northern Ireland. Indeed, as I said in the House last week, I spent a good deal of my summer holiday here in Northern Ireland. I am happy to say that I had a very enjoyable time and had no difficulty doing so. He really must reflect on his comments because the industry will feel very let down after all the work that it has carried out over this year. Indeed, that work continues into next year, when the World Police and Fire Games come to Northern Ireland.

Although we want to continue to build on tourism performance, it is important that we look for that direct access. That is where we should concentrate our efforts to ensure that we get more direct flights into Belfast. I must say to those who say that the UK visa scheme will put people off coming to Northern Ireland that millions of people came to the United Kingdom for the Olympics and Her Majesty The Queen's jubilee celebrations. I think that the UK scheme works very well. If people come in through a UK airport, they can, of course, go to the Republic of Ireland if they so desire. So, it is nonsense to say that they cannot use the UK scheme.

Of course, I would be delighted to see a reciprocal arrangement. I want to put that on record. I have set out how the matter has been progressed. In closing, I want to take the opportunity to call upon the Republic of Ireland's Government to implement the necessary security upgrades to enable progress to be made on implementation of the waiver scheme. That is a genuine call. That is where the motion should have gone. Unfortunately, however, Sinn Féin decided to talk about the British Government instead. That is where the motion falls down.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to conclude the debate. I thank everybody who contributed to what has been an energetic debate at times. The issue was first raised by my party in February. To be fair, at that time, the Minister's responses to other Members and me were constructive. She is shaking her head. Perhaps she disagrees.

Mrs Foster: Is the Member saying that I have not been constructive now?

Mr McKay: Not in parts of your last contribution. However, to be fair, at that point,

certainly you raised the issue with a number of Ministers. That has to be recognised. Given the events of the past few days and the past week, it is important that when we have debates such as this one — and let there be no doubt that they are economic debates — we must try to be as constructive as possible.

Look at the list of countries that Phil Flanagan named at the start of the debate. We talk about the rise of the BRIC countries. Brazil, Russia and India are all on that list. Tourism Ireland has highlighted China and India as the most important emerging markets. With regard to global economics, of course, the more that those economies grow, the more their middle classes grow and the more disposable income they have. That has to be viewed as an opportunity, particularly when it comes to tourism. Figures show clearly that citizens of those countries have more disposable income and are spending more money on flying abroad. People have referred to that as the symbol of a growing middle class. Therefore, there is an opportunity. We need to take advantage of that and ensure that economic barriers to progress and tourism businesses are removed.

Maeve McLaughlin referred to tourists who come into Ireland via Dublin Airport. I think that 68% of visitors to Derry come through Dublin Airport. Tourists from those countries in particular have to pay €100 for multiple visas. To make a trip to Belfast, the Giant's Causeway or Derry costs an extra £68. Of course, when a family or a group of businesses budget for a trip to Ireland, all those factors are taken into account. Obviously, that can result in those parties deciding not to come north to the Six Counties. That needs to be taken into account.

With regard to the two key markets, I think that Danny Kinahan mentioned that we need to have statistics and facts in front of us. The facts are there and they are quite stark. India and China are two of the biggest countries in the world. The average length of stay of Indian tourists in Ireland is 10 to 15 days. Obviously, there is more than ample opportunity for those tourists to come north on visits to Ireland. India's outbound travel exceeded 13 million departures in 2010. That figure is estimated to reach 20 million by 2015.

Chinese tourists are now the fourth biggest-spending in the world. By 2020, China's middle class will expand to 700 million, which is 45% of its population. That represents an incredible boost in disposable income. One point that must be noted with regard to the Chinese market is that the Giant's Causeway is particularly popular with Chinese tourists. We

need to ensure that they come north to the north coast.

Under the new visa scheme, as has already been mentioned, 10 tour operators in India and nine new tour operators in China have been programmed in for the first time in 2012. There is absolutely no doubt that the scheme is starting to pay dividends. From May to July 2012, there has been a 5.7% increase in the number of visitors to Ireland from China and India. There are now 17 Etihad and Emirates flights to Ireland, providing a gateway from the Middle East to Ireland as a whole.

Phil Flanagan opened the debate, pointing out that the issue was the restriction on travel. That is what the focus is on; it is not about whether the scheme is for the island of Ireland or both these islands. It is about removing the restrictions on travel for tourists. He welcomed the Minister's work and the fact that she wants to see the problem resolved in the common interest of everyone in the House today, regardless of our differing views on the matter.

Robin Newton recognised the benefit of the visa, the difficulties of dealing with the issue and the willingness of the Dublin and London Governments to resolve it. Danny Kinahan was a bit more cynical and critical, and concluded his contribution by declaring, I believe, an intent to annex the Twenty-six Counties. That was something of interest to note.

Anna Lo made a very good contribution. She cited the recent example of a group of visitors who arrived in Dublin. Of course, there are people who come even from across the water, never mind further away, who do not know the geopolitics of this island. If there are people in Liverpool who do not know that this island is partitioned, think about people from further afield who are visiting the island, having come in mainly through Dublin, but have no idea that they need a second visa to come to the North. If they see a brochure in a hotel or a B&B in Dundalk and decide that they want to go further north, but realise that they will have to pay an extra charge, they will think twice. That is certainly unacceptable.

Maeve McLaughlin referred to the fact that since the scheme was introduced the number of tourists from China has doubled and that 63% of visitors to Derry come through Dublin airport.

I disagreed with much of what Paul Frew said, which will come as no surprise, but I agree that north Antrim is a great place for any tourist to visit. People will have no problem in spending two weeks in north Antrim. Indeed, I spent a

week on Rathlin Island this year and I could have spent another week there because it is a great tourism destination.

Sandra Overend did not seem to understand the connection between this debate and the economic difficulties that we sometimes face. Regardless of the different positions of most of the parties, we are all agreed that this is an important economic issue, and it is important that the Ulster Unionists reflect on the fact that it is a key issue for job creation in the tourism sector.

Patsy McGlone referred to the fact that the current arrangements are unenforceable and that there is no way of detecting breaches. He also said that we need to see some movement on the introduction of the common travel area because we have had no indication of any progress on that front.

The Minister said that both Governments are committed to working on this issue. Nevertheless, I think that it needs to be made a priority. Of course, the motion refers to the British Government's position, but we need to resolve the problems that exist. We need to ensure that, as soon as possible, there is a visa waiver scheme in place and that we do not have to wait until 2015, 2016 or 2017. Why can this issue not be resolved by the end of this year?

Patsy McGlone said that the current arrangements are unenforceable. We need to take a pragmatic look at the situation and encourage the British Government to take a more flexible approach to the issue to ensure that a visa waiver scheme is put in place as soon as possible.

The longer that we defer this, the more that it is going to impact on our local tourist operators and our local B&Bs, and we need to grow this economy on an all-island basis, because it makes sense to do so. The fact of the matter is that, for the majority of tourists coming to this island, we want to see them up here in the North. That is why it is in our best interests to operate on an all-island basis. Therefore, I conclude, a LeasCheann Comhairle, in support of the motion quite fully.

6.00 pm

Mr Ross: Just in case I missed it, did the Member refer to whether his colleagues in the Parliament in the Republic of Ireland have brought this issue up and raised it with the Irish Government, where it should be raised?

Mr McKay: Yes. Sandra McLellan, the Teachta Dála for, I think, Cork South-East, raised it with the Minister there. So we are raising this matter

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

Mr McKay: — on an all-island basis, and I welcome the DUP's interest in our operations in the Dáil.

Question put.

The Assembly divided.

Ayes 41; Noes 46.

AYES

Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Mr McKay

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Frew and Mr Irwin.

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Agnew

Question accordingly negatived.

6.15 pm

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

Republic of Ireland Government: Apology

Mr Speaker: As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the improved relations with the Republic of Ireland; further welcomes the success of the visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the Republic of Ireland in 2011; notes with concern the recent evidence given to the Smithwick tribunal regarding a lack of support for the investigation of terrorist suspects; believes that relations would improve further if the current Government of the Republic of Ireland were to address the role played by the Irish Government of the day in the emergence of the Provisional IRA and the roles of past Governments regarding the pursuit of terrorists; and calls on the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland to issue an apology.

Dealing with the past has been fraught with difficulty in recent years. We are all aware of the problems with which we have been presented in trying to find an acceptable resolution to that conundrum. However, one thing is for certain: we cannot have a highly selective approach to dealing with the past. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the belief in the republican psyche. Every time we refer to, discuss or debate inquiries, inquests or shoot-to-kill policies, and every time people are called to give evidence in front of inquiries, it is inevitably the case that the policemen or soldiers involved, who were carrying out their lawful duties, are cross-examined and questioned about the activities in which they were engaged. On the odd occasion, republicans go into the witness box, as the deputy First Minister did in the Bloody Sunday inquiry. However, he promptly pleaded the fifth amendment and decided that he was not going to talk about his past. So we cannot have a selective recalling of the events of recent history.

A mindset has emerged in recent years in which, whenever an event involving the state forces of the United Kingdom engaging in counterterrorism is diagnosed or discussed in the public domain, the suggestion arises that other events should be discussed. Last week, relatives of the Kingsmills victims went to the Irish Republic to try to seek some redress. Some people indicated that there is a considerable difference between the actions of paramilitary forces and the forces of the state. Therefore, we should take account of that, and that is why this motion has been termed in the way that it has. This motion talks about the Government of the Irish Republic at the commencement of what were our Troubles and the part that that Government played in a very turbulent time in 1969 in creating what became the Provisional IRA. We are discussing the forces of that state and what they did regarding the commencement of our troubled past.

I quote from 'The Irish Times':

"The news on the morning of May 6th, 1970, that Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney had been sacked from the Government by the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, was a bombshell. The shock was compounded when it emerged that the sackings arose from the alleged involvement of the two senior ministers in a failed attempt to import arms illegally through Dublin Airport.

By the end of the month, the two men had been arrested and charged with conspiracy to import arms. Also charged were Captain James Kelly formerly of Army intelligence; John Kelly, a leading Belfast Republican, and Albert Luykx, a Belgian who owned a hotel in north Dublin often used for Fianna Fáil functions."

It is common knowledge, and no one disputed, even after the collapse of the arms trial that I have referred to, that, at that time, a fund of £100,000 was established, principally by the Government of the Irish Republic. As a result of that fund being established, a meeting was held — I am quoting again from 'The Irish Times':

"in Bailieboro, Co Cavan, of the Northern Citizen Defence Committees which soon became fronts for the IRA. The meeting was told that £50,000"

— of the £100,000 —

"would be available to buy weapons to defend nationalist areas."

It is fairly clear what was done and by whom it was done.

I will quote a few other people who were involved at the time. The republican John Kelly, who was one of the co-accused, said:

"We assumed that we could believe what we were being told by the leader of the state, by Jack Lynch, who didn't equivocate when we said we were looking for arms. It was always very definite that they understood that we were there in pursuit of arms. This had been put in place by Captain Jim Kelly, by Neil Blaney, by the other Ministers that we had met."

The republican John Kelly was fairly clear. Kevin Boland was one of the co-accused and was a Government Minister between 1966 and 1970. He is quoted by Peter Taylor as saying:

"Street fighting training was given in Donegal by the Irish army. Ten men from Derry"

— he obviously had a spelling problem, but anyway —

" — came and were given basic military street fighting training".

I would be interested to know who those 10 men were. I presume that they were prominent republicans from Londonderry. I can think of at least one, but we shall see who emerges from the undergrowth. To finish the quote:

" this was done with the knowledge of the whole government."

That is a quote by Kevin Boland, one of the Government Ministers. There are other quotes from people who were involved at the time. Captain Kelly was asked about the split between the Official IRA and the emerging Provisional IRA. He was asked whether there were promises of weapons and money, possibly, to the North. Captain Kelly's response was:

"I would not argue with that. It would be logical."

He then added that it would be in good conscience that his Cabinet should arm a group that would attack the Irish Government if it were a Marxist Official IRA instead of a more nationalist-minded Provisional IRA. Therefore, the emerging split within violent republicanism was encouraged by the state of the Irish

Republic. This the crux of the motion. A state — a national Government of the Irish Republic — ensured that, in secret, they connived with known violent republican elements to allow for the emergence of what became the Provisional IRA. That is a fairly well recognised and established fact, setting aside the fact that the arms trial was never going to go anywhere. Most people seemed to accept that that was the sequence of events.

I note that the Taoiseach last week indicated that he could not apologise for the actions of the IRA. This motion does not seek an apology from the Government or Prime Minister of the Irish Republic for the actions of the IRA. We may seek apologies from the IRA for the actions that it was responsible for, but the predecessor of Enda Kenny, Jack Lynch, was in government as Taoiseach of the Irish Republic and, with the full knowledge of members of his Cabinet, allowed money to be given to the emerging Provisional IRA. It is for that that we ask him to apologise.

We are not asking him to apologise for the actions of the Provos, but we are saying to Mr Kenny and to the Irish Republic's Government: you acted as a midwife at the birth of the Provo monster that we had to deal with for 30 years. It took 30 years to defeat and disarm that monster, but eventually that was accomplished. We now want to try to bring closure to many people who suffered as a result of those 30 years, and we want you, Mr Kenny, to acknowledge the events of your predecessor Government and Taoiseach and accept that the Government played a part in that emerging force and apologise for it. We would then close the book and move on, hopefully to more explicit apologies from those who carried out the activities and atrocities in the first place.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move amendment No 1:

After '2011;' insert

"notes the apologies from the United Kingdom Government in relation to the Bloody Sunday and Claudy bombing events; further"

I am grateful for the opportunity, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to move the amendment, and I thank the sponsor of the motion for his contribution. It will come as no surprise that I am supporting the proposal because, last Thursday in Government buildings in Dublin, I asked the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, to apologise, not for himself but on behalf of his Government and his people for the security failings and political failings of

successive Irish Governments. Those failings may not have caused atrocities such as Kingsmills, but they meant that little or nothing was done to prevent them.

Border unionists across many counties have shared experience of the failings of Irish Governments, and, sadly, those experiences amount to one thing: no justice. Injured loved ones, but no justice. Murdered loved ones, yet no justice. There were few arrests, even fewer prosecutions and little or no disruption to the operations of the murderous republican gangs but, ultimately, no justice. More often than not, those IRA gangs planned their crimes in the Irish Republic. It was in the Irish Republic that they prepared for them and nearly always into the Irish Republic that they fled and celebrated after committing them. Those IRA gangs were responsible for the murders of ordinary mill workers, innocent people and security personnel, and they launched a campaign that amounted to the ethnic cleansing of border Protestants.

I will focus on Kingsmills, in part because the time given for this debate is probably not sufficient to do justice to all who suffered while the Irish Government stood idle, and in part because Kingsmills is so close to me personally and so close to home. Its victims were workmen, predominantly from my home village of Bessbrook, and that incident on 5 January 1976 will be for ever in the collective memory of the people of Bessbrook. Whilst republicans are desperate to wipe the stain of crimes such as those at Kingsmills from history and to try to forget or ignore the uncomfortable truth, the families of the victims of such atrocities will ensure that those events will never be forgotten.

We in the Assembly are duty-bound to ensure that those events are never forgotten.

6.30 pm

It is worth remembering that the IRA or republicans do not want to talk about Kingsmills, let alone accept responsibility for it. It is even too shameful for them to admit to, or, as is more likely, it exposed the blatant sectarianism of their war, an exposure for which not even the most creative of republican thinkers could offer an excuse. Therefore, never mind providing an explanation; they continue either to hide or to lie.

Of course, there are those who believe that it may not have been the IRA; that it may have been somebody else. That stood until last year,

when we had the report by the Historical Enquiries Team. For although that report has not brought closer the prospect of arrests and prosecutions of the criminals involved, it has nailed the myth that the IRA was not responsible. Through ballistics, the report demonstrated that, without doubt, the guns used at Kingsmills were used in many other attacks and murders.

Let me remind the House that at Kingsmills at least 10 weapons were used and approximately 160 rounds were fired at unarmed workmen, first as they were standing and then when they lay injured on the ground. Those weapons were linked conclusively by the HET to 37 murders, 22 attempted murders and a further 19 non-fatal shootings.

Some eight weapons have been recovered in the years since Kingsmills. Four were recovered in the Irish Republic and four in Northern Ireland. There is an interesting contrast between those weapons recovered in Northern Ireland and the prosecutions that then resulted, and those found in the Republic of Ireland. One of the Kingsmills weapons was recovered in the Republic of Ireland in November 1981, during the search of a car in Dundalk. It had been used in five murders and seven attempted murders along with other terrorist attacks, all of which took place in Northern Ireland. In February 1982, despite the history of the weapon, the individual concerned was given only a seven-year sentence.

A second weapon used at Kingsmills and recovered in the Republic at Carlingford in May 1979 unbelievably has no gardaí record of the circumstances of its recovery. There is certainly no prospect of prosecutions. A third weapon used at Kingsmills was recovered at Dungooley in County Louth in October 1978. Remarkably, again, there are no records of the circumstances of its recovery and/or its disposal. That weapon was used in the murder of the Orangemen outside Newtownhamilton only three months before Kingsmills. After Kingsmills, it was used in murders in April 1976 and 1977. One person was convicted in Northern Ireland for the murder of the Orangemen at Tullyvallen, which, as I said, took place three months before Kingsmills, and the murder of a soldier three months after it.

A fourth weapon used at Kingsmills was recovered in County Louth, this time in January 1978. Yet again, remarkably, no records exist as to the circumstances of its recovery. It, too, had been used at the Orange hall at Tullyvallen and in other murders and attempted murders. Therefore, three of the four weapons recovered

on separate occasions in the South in the years after Kingsmills have simply no record of the circumstances in which they were recovered. The question is simple: why not?

Those questions, among others, require answers, and they are issues for the Irish Government to consider as we move forward. The meeting between the Taoiseach and the Kingsmills families was important in itself. It was a courteous meeting, heavy with emotion, as the Taoiseach heard at first hand the impact of the IRA's cross-border attacks. I pay tribute to the families and their representatives who attended. It would be impossible that, having opened that door, the Taoiseach having heard the very real accounts of victims and families, to think that simply nothing further could happen, or that nothing further would come of it.

Improving North/South relations will begin in earnest only when the Irish Government acknowledge that more could and should have been done. When that acknowledgement comes — I believe that it will be a matter of when, not if — we can seriously begin to improve relations. That will, indeed, be a significant step forward. Of course, the uncomfortable truth will, inevitably, be in addressing the next step, which will be to ask the question: why was more not done?

The Taoiseach was completely right when he said that it was not for him to apologise for the IRA. Let me make it clear: no one asked him to apologise for the actions of the IRA. Indeed, there are people in the Assembly who are much better placed to do that. As much as it would be a step forward for the Taoiseach to acknowledge the failings in the South, it is about time that republicans came clean in Northern Ireland.

Events such as Kingsmills cannot be justified, no matter what twisted logic is applied. Serb nationalists will come to recognise that Srebrenica was wrong. Closer to home, Irish republicans must come to accept that what they did was wrong.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert

“; and reiterates its call for the Secretary of State alongside her counterparts in the Irish Government to convene talks between all the political parties to reach agreement on a process to comprehensively deal with the past.”

I want to make it clear that my party can support the original motion and the first amendment only if our amendment is carried, as we believe that the issue needs to be addressed through a comprehensive mechanism for dealing with the past. I hope that, during the debate, we do not indulge too heavily in what some may term the blame game. We have to be very careful that we do not fall into a trap of increasing animosity, thus stifling progress and preventing people from getting recognition for or answers about the things that were done to them. Rather, we should grasp the opportunities that debates such as this give us to demonstrate our willingness, as an Assembly, to begin a process through which the legacy of the past can be effectively addressed, healing commenced and questions answered.

We need to establish a process to allow us to examine very deep, hurtful and painful issues that many, if not all, of us have had visited upon us, whether through the death of a loved one, an attack on our property or the impact of an event on an entire community. We owe it to each other and to those who are yet to come in our society to address what drove us to do the things that we did to each other. When one third of our population considers themselves to be directly affected by the conflict, that cannot and should not be ignored. Dealing with Northern Ireland's past and its legacy is a difficult and complicated issue, and there remains much individual and collective hurt, particularly among those who have suffered directly as a result of the violence and conflict.

Very few would deny that Her Majesty The Queen's visit to the Republic of Ireland and apologies from the British Government in relation to Bloody Sunday and Claudy have improved relations, and we have no difficulty in acknowledging that today. However, progress in high politics does not always filter down to the grass roots of our society. The reality is that division and segregation are still the norm in many parts of Northern Ireland. One only has to reflect on the events of recent weeks to know that that is true. We are a society infected by sectarianism and its outputs. Rates of sectarian crime have increased in recent years, and it accounts for roughly half of all reported hate crime. Division and duplication of services create huge financial costs. Research has revealed that, sadly, a third of our children show preferences for names and flags and display different attitudes to the police and marches from a very young age. It is clear, therefore, that the legacy of the Troubles must be addressed in a way that transforms our society from one that is characterised by

division to one that is characterised by a desire for a true and lasting reconciliation.

The Government of Ireland have played their part in our history, which, as a society, we are trying to unravel. However, they have also played a significant part in the process that has brought us to where we are today. So, it is vital that they are involved in the process for dealing with the past. That is why, although we have some doubts about the historical implications in the DUP's motion, we welcome it as a step forward in recognising that the Irish Government, like all other parties that were part of the events of the past 40 years, need to talk about their involvement during that time.

We recognise the value that apologies can have in helping to heal the divisions and wounds of the past. However, it is the Alliance Party's belief that a mechanism that deals with the past comprehensively needs to be put in place first, and that that could provide appropriate apologies but may also lead to forgiveness. Failure to breach the divide will lead to a continuing divided and wasted future for many of our people, particularly those who, on this day, are on low incomes or are losing their jobs. That should be the first priority of the House.

For many years, my colleagues and I in the Alliance Party have emphasised the importance of overcoming divisions and building a shared future for Northern Ireland, but that cannot be achieved without us as a society dealing with the legacy of the past, which, if left untouched, threatens to dominate our future.

It is over 10 months since the Assembly called on the previous Secretary of State to convene cross-party talks. It is over three years since the publication of the Eames/Bradley report, and there has been no progress towards the establishment of a true reconciliation process. This is a test for the new Secretary of State and all the other players in the process. The legacy of the past remains a source of hurt and antagonism and infects our institutions and many sectors of society. It is time to address that legacy. I, therefore, urge Members to support my party's amendment and call on the Secretary of State to convene talks so that we can begin to drive the process forward.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was listening carefully, particularly to Gregory's remarks. He introduced them by saying that being selective was a bad approach. I asked myself whether it was really Gregory who was saying that, but he

actually said it three times, and then, of course, he proceeded to be very selective.

Mr Allister: Let us see how selective you are.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am glad that our friend from the Back Benches is paying attention.

The issue that we have to deal with is this: are we serious about getting at the truth? I direct that straight across the Benches. If people are going to acknowledge the origin of the trouble and why there is a civil rights history in this state, we have to clearly examine what was wrong with the Government that caused people to go out to protest. I have yet to hear unionists address that as a contributory factor to the inferno that engulfed us all. When people went out, peacefully, to protest and to ask for civil rights, the RUC was sent in against them with batons and water cannons. They arrested people. They used the law; they had legal powers, and they abused them.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No. I am sorry; but I have had enough of your nonsense.

If unionists were prepared to address that, we might start to get to first base; we might start to get to the position at which people can say: "Well, of course, lots of things were wrong." I do not know any republican who, under any circumstances, would say that there was not fault on all sides. I know of no republican who would not acknowledge that there were many protagonists and that there were those who created the conditions of conflict that eventually erupted. I lay that at 50 years of misrule, discrimination, gerrymandering and denial of democratic rights by the old Stormont Government in which the unionists had one-party rule for far too long. If that could be recognised, we would be at a starting gate, in my view, because we have to try to create a process and circumstances in which people can bring their stories and their versions of what happened and the events that traumatised people on all sides of our community.
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: You can make noise and shake your head, but that truth will keep coming back to unionists until they start to

reciprocate, start to think about it and then start to offer a way out of this corner. If they prefer to stay in the corner, I feel a pity for them, but I feel more of a pity for the people whom they represent. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will take a look at the recent events at the marches, for instance. They exposed quite a lot, but, more than anything else, they exposed the complete lack of leadership on the unionist side.

Running in front of the mob, running in front of the loyalist spokespersons, hiding from the media —

6.45 pm

Mrs Foster: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us get back to the business that is before the House. Members will know that I give them some latitude around all these issues. Therefore, let us get back to the debate that is before the House.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: My remarks are entirely relevant. If people want to talk about being selective, they need to think about doublethink. In the debate immediately before this one, the DUP said that that matter should not be brought here and is a matter for the Dublin Government. We now have a DUP motion that is addressed to the Dublin Government, so you need to shake your heads. Let us deal with the issues.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes.

Mrs Foster: The Member is mixing up the previous motion with this motion. The previous motion was addressed to our Government — the British Government — when it ought to have been addressed to the Irish Government. That was the point of the previous motion, so it is a complete mix-up to which he is now referring.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: It is not a mix-up. People can read the motion for themselves. It is directed.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you very much. You are making a demand on the Irish Government, and I am not here to defend the Irish Government because I have issues with their role over many years. I will give only one example: the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, which were carried out by unionist paramilitaries under the direct control, as proven, of British Crown agents. Perhaps unionists think that we do not need to address that matter. Perhaps unionists do not think that that is part of the truth recovery process that will lead to the necessary reconciliation. Therefore, I make a plea to unionists: let us get real and start to engage on all of the truth.

The role of the old Stormont Government cannot be left out or the role of the British Government and their agents. There were references to actions in which they were involved, and there are many actions in which they were involved about which there is complete denial. That should not happen if we are going to deal with the truth.

Gregory addressed some of those issues towards us, and I think that there is a responsibility on us. However, if there is a situation in which one side adamantly refuses to address issues about which they have information and have some responsibility for, how do they expect other people to respond? What does that give us 15 years after the Good Friday Agreement? It gives us stasis, and it creates public dismay.

People are starting to believe that the Assembly is incapable. I do not believe that, and I will keep coming back to this subject. That is the direct relationship to the motion, which I am glad that the DUP introduced. The Unionist Party introduced an amendment, did not even speak to it and forgot to refer to it. We had a very harrowing explanation of last week's visit to Dublin, and I did not dismiss it or refuse to listen to what was said.

Although the Alliance Party amendment is good in what it adds, it does not correct the selectivity or imbalance in the motion. I am sorry about that because the Alliance Party was making a genuine effort, and I commend its approach. Therefore, as Gregory invites us to —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: — we should reject selectivity in approaching these matters.

Mr McDevitt: This is a sad evening because looking back on our past and reflecting on the

terrible human tragedy that was the conflict in this part of Ireland can invoke nothing but sadness. It can invoke nothing but a desperate need for us to treat the emotions of those who lost and suffered on all sides, and our duty to history, to do things better than the House is doing tonight. Whatever the merits of the argument behind the motion — some people may feel that they have a strong and deeply held belief that the motion should become a reality and that what it calls for should happen — this is not the way to do it.

The House should resolve to support the Smithwick tribunal and to say unconditionally that, no matter what the findings of that tribunal, we will support its outcome in the same way as the House should have been capable of supporting the Bloody Sunday tribunal and saying that, no matter what the findings of that tribunal, we would support its outcome. Even then, we are failing in our duty to properly tackle the past. We can no longer deny that this generation of legislators cannot go on in a game of historical ping-pong, ignoring our duty to deal with this island's past.

You would think that we share an objective of achieving reconciliation and that that reconciliation cannot simply end at the borders of the North of Ireland but must include the island. And you would think that putting what I would call a process of national reconciliation should be at the top of all our agendas. Yet we refuse doggedly to even tackle the meaning of the very word. It is not too difficult to see what it takes to reach reconciliation. It takes truth. And truth can be painful, and we all know that in our personal lives. It takes —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: In a second, Mr Campbell.

It takes an acknowledgement that justice cannot be denied, avoided or dismissed. And it takes trust. Unfortunately, the motion before us today does not create the space for any of those three things to exist, because it is premature. Now I will happily give way to Mr Campbell.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member talked about truth and about a way of dealing with this. Does the Member accept that, ludicrous as it may appear, if 40 years ago the British Government had set aside £100,000 to create a loyalist paramilitary organisation, and had various Government Ministers in Whitehall colluded to establish that organisation — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Campbell: Had they done that, does he not think that nationalists would have been asking and demanding an apology from the British Government?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank Mr Campbell for his observation, and I think that he makes my point. We can no longer allow a process of reconciliation to be passed off on selective interpretation of history. He has his interpretation. I am an Irishman and a Dubliner. I am very proud of the state that educated me and that gave me the chance to be who I am today. I will accept my responsibility as a citizen of that state, as I am sure all of us will — those of us who owe allegiance to it — if in the process of time it has questions to answer. However, what I will not do is peddle my own, prejudiced history on someone else. Nor will I expect them to accept a biased view of history in the context of a process of reconciliation. This is not some academic debate. This is about building a new society. Either we are up for this or we are not.

The Alliance Party amendment is good, but it fails to deal with a flawed motion. That is the thing that we regret about it and why, with regret, we will not be able to support it.

One thing that, I think, needs to be said during a debate like this — and it is a simple thing — is that we are not all to blame. There is no sense in saying that everyone on this island shares some blame for what went wrong and the atrocities that were committed on behalf of different people on this island. We are simply not all to blame, but we all must play a part in the process of reconciliation. We all must have the courage, in the fullness of time and in the right way, to face up to what may well be uncomfortable truths, but we cannot get to that place by selectively nitpicking and pointing to specific events in history and expecting those to constitute an improvement in our relations, a deepening of trust and a sense of a new society.

For 15 years, the main two parties in this place have dodged their responsibility on this issue. Before we leave to face the people again, I would like those two parties to stop the megaphone diplomacy across the Chamber and to come back here with proposals that are

capable of commanding support. Proposals that say —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost gone.

Mr McDevitt: — that we were not all to blame but that we all share a duty to get it right.

Mr Anderson: In supporting the motion tabled in my name and that of my DUP colleagues, I am conscious that only last week the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic tried to wriggle his way out of taking responsibility for the failures of the Southern state when he said that he could not apologise for the IRA. His refusal to live up to his responsibilities stands in marked contrast with the actions and approach of the United Kingdom Government in recent times. Nobody should be in any doubt as to the need for a proper, formal public apology from the Dublin Government. There is no justifiable reason why Enda Kenny should continue to find excuses to duck facing up to the nasty truth of Dublin's role in our past.

Enda Kenny's abject failure to face up to what was done by state officials and representatives on behalf of the Southern state and in the name of his people serves only to excuse and justify the actions of those who actively helped to put the guns and bombs into the hands of evil terrorists, some of whom sit in this Chamber. That failure subsequently also helped many to shelter from justice.

The actions of elements of the Dublin Government assisted those who are guilty when it comes to the disappeared, most of whom are secretly buried in hidden graves in that large graveyard known as the border counties of the Irish Republic. The actions of elements of the Dublin Government helped to condemn the people of Claudy and the Kingsmills workers to early graves. It helped to set the La Mon House Hotel on fire and place bombs in the way of those who fled from Bloody Friday. Elements of the Southern Government actively assisted in the formation of the Provisional IRA, and Enda Kenny certainly has that to apologise for.

Only last week, our Prime Minister issued a public apology that related to previous Governments. Indeed, even before that apology relating to the Hillsborough disaster, there was an apology for the actions of a Government several decades in the past, which related to Bloody Sunday. On the point of the United Kingdom Government apology for Bloody Sunday, one reason given by some political representatives who campaigned in

support of that inquiry was that Governments should be judged against higher standards than illegal groups and must be the upholders of laws that they enact. That either applies to all Governments, Dublin included, or to only selected Governments, with Dublin let off the hook.

Let us be in no doubt that Dublin has much to apologise for. Let me take just the issue of extradition. Between 1973 and 1997, 113 extradition requests were made by the United Kingdom to the Republic on terrorist-related offences. Over that 25-year period, eight people, or 7%, were extradited. During the same period, 296 extradition requests were made by the United Kingdom to Dublin for non-terrorist-related offences. Of those, 124 people, approximately 42%, were extradited. So, for 25 years, if you were wanted on non-terrorist-related offences, there was a 42% chance, almost one in two, of being extradited from the Republic to the United Kingdom. If you were wanted on terrorist-related offences there was only a 7% chance, or one in every 14, of being extradited. So, for 25 years, an on-the-run terrorist was seven times less likely to be extradited to the United Kingdom than those wanted for other offences.

A succession of Dublin Governments regarded the brutal sectarian murders of innocent men, women and children as political. In consequence, those cold-blooded murderers were allowed to roam free and continue with their ruthless campaign. The border was allowed to be an accommodating, well-used rat run that allowed terrorists of the worst kind to roam free and have a safe haven to live and plot their next evil atrocity, leaving a trail of death and destruction in Northern Ireland.

A succession of Southern Governments were accomplices after the fact to the ethnic cleansing of the border and the wholesale murder of our citizens. It is long past time that Enda Kenny finally ended the wall of silence. It is time for him to do the decent thing and to admit, acknowledge and apologise, and he must do so officially in the Dáil. I support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the sponsors for bringing this important debate to the House. I obviously support the Ulster Unionist amendment and also pay tribute to and congratulate my colleague Danny Kennedy MLA for his continuing good work for those most impacted by the Kingsmills atrocity. If ever there was an event in our Troubles that deserves the word atrocity it is what happened at Kingsmills.

However, let me start positively. I welcome the improved relations with the Republic of Ireland. I welcome the success of the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the Republic last year. For my money, that was an act of outstanding leadership by Her Majesty. To stand where she did and say the words that she said was true leadership, from which we could all learn.

7.00 pm

It also seems to me that the United Kingdom is in the lead when it comes to apologies with regards to dealing with our past. It was not just the Queen; the Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, apologised for the events of Bloody Sunday. That was very difficult for unionists to take on board, but he said that it was wrong, and I must accept that the Prime Minister has a right to say those words. The previous Secretary of State, Owen Paterson, also apologised for some aspects of the handling of the Claudy bombing. Again, difficult though it is, as a unionist I must accept that that is the Secretary of State's view and that it was right that he should make an apology.

The danger is that the more often one side apologises, the more likely it is that just one side will be painted as the sole villain of the piece for 35 years of terrorist violence. Clearly, that was not the case. Mr Campbell laid it before us with quotations from the time of the gunrunning. I interviewed Captain Kelly and others who were involved in the day, and it is clear that the Government of the Republic of Ireland, by commission and omission, created and enabled conditions for terrorism to thrive and for people to cross the border and murder citizens of Northern Ireland. My Government are accused of aiding and abetting terrorism — is that not the very thing that we are accused of? Yet the Government of the Republic of Ireland will not open their books and their mouths to tell us the truth about their involvement.

As I said, my Government have apologised on many occasions. We have had an apology about Bloody Sunday and the Claudy bombing, and we have had an apology and a rewriting of the investigation into the McGurk's Bar bombing. Many will also remember the case of Aidan McAnespie, who was shot dead by a gun operated by a soldier who said that his hand had slipped. The Historical Enquiries Team investigated that killing and said that although it could not determine the exact circumstances under which the gun was fired, slippage by the hand of the soldier was the least likely explanation. That was followed by an

acknowledgement of the pain of the McAnespie family, which was jointly issued by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State for Defence. That brought a great deal of closure to the McAnespie family, whose son Aidan was shot by a member of the army — my army. It brought a great deal of closure, but it did not bring complete closure. Why not? Because the Irish Government would not release the details of their inquiry into the killing of Aidan McEnespie. The Irish Government appointed Garda Deputy Commissioner Eugene Crowley. He reported, yet the Irish Government will not allow the McAnespie family access to that report. I ask why not.

A word if I may on the difference between apologies and acknowledgements. Apologies can be made while swimming in very shallow water; we can bump into each other on our way into the House and say, "I am very sorry." What we need is beyond an apology; we need a true acknowledgement. We need the sort of acknowledgement that the Queen gave in Dublin about things that, perhaps, should not have happened.

Mr McLaughlin, whatever may have been wrong with this House in the 1960s, it was not worth one IRA murder — not one, Mr McLaughlin. It could have been fixed through negotiation.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: What about loyalist murders?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: The Alliance Party's amendment calls on the new Secretary of State to bring forward a comprehensive series of resolutions to deal with the past. I met the Secretary of State today and put that point to her. I put it to the House that agreement will need to found —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Nesbitt: — among the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly primarily. I support amendment No 1.

Mr Moutray: At the outset, I acknowledge that the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland has improved. I note especially the success of the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to Dublin last year. However, having said that, I am unequivocal in my belief that a public apology is required from the Irish Government for the role that they

played in the early days of the Troubles. Like many others who lived through 30 years of murder and mayhem, I still feel very aggrieved at the Provisional IRA's cold, callous and unrepentant attitude throughout. In fact, after 20 years of ceasefire, little remorse has been shown. That grieves me, and it grieves many of the people whom I represent.

However, the motion today focuses on the Irish Government and on the fact that, since 1970, they have washed their hands of the issue. They have remained silent rather than publicly apologise for their indirect involvement, particularly in the role of the Government of the day in setting up and financing the IRA. Although we are often reminded there is no evidence that the Irish Government ever backed the paramilitary tactics of the IRA, I believe that that Government failed to crack down on that organisation's activity in the Republic of Ireland over the decades.

Today, we think of the comments of the Irish Government, and specifically those of Enda Kenny, who told the relatives of those killed in the Kingsmills massacre that he could not apologise for the IRA. Although, to a degree, I know that he cannot apologise for the IRA, I believe that Mr Kenny could apologise for the connection between what the IRA did in its infancy and the Government of the Irish Republic of the day, as well as for the fact that the Republic of Ireland was seen as a haven for terrorists.

The role played by the Irish Republic in the past has been highlighted recently by the Smithwick tribunal, which bears huge significance to my constituency of Upper Bann, given that the late Chief Superintendent Harry Breen was from Banbridge. The revelations about the attitudes of some government representatives and police personnel dealing with that case would make the blood chill. Although it is important that we gain the truth about what happened on that fateful day in 1989, and find out the exact nature of any collusion or failing on the part of the Irish state forces, real closure for the victims is ultimately delivered through justice being served on the perpetrators. I hold the view that collusion is wrong, and always has been, regardless of its origins.

A blind eye has been turned for too long to the support given to the IRA during the Troubles by certain elements in the Republic of Ireland, and, as such, I believe that an acknowledgement and apology from the Irish Government would cement the fact that support for the IRA is firmly in the past. In my constituency, we are reminded of the brutality of our history every

day by survivors of those killed, by memorials to those killed and by the vivid memories of those killed or brutally injured throughout the Troubles. Those people have suffered at the hands of terrorists and rightly feel aggrieved at the role played by the Irish Government; at the fact that they have never even acknowledged that there were wrongdoings in the Government of the day; and at the fact that they could have done so much more at that time to halt the terrorist activity of the IRA, which could have prevented significant loss of life over 40 years. It is time for the Irish Government to come out and publicly denounce the activities of the past and apologise for their involvement. I support the motion.

Mr Eastwood: The motion is a manifestation of perception rather than fact. The Smithwick tribunal is yet to report, and we still have no comprehensive mechanism for dealing with our tragic past. I understand that the very strongly and widely held perception in the unionist community is that the Irish Government have questions to answer. However, perceptions cannot be given such formal recognition in an Assembly motion. Let me be clear: we will accept any findings of the Smithwick tribunal or any other inquiry into the past. If the Irish Government have questions to answer, we say that they should answer them.

There is no escaping the fact that the debate on this motion is again a continuation of our conflicted past through the forum of this Assembly. We are at risk of for ever being locked in a conversation about the past if we do not deal with it properly. A look at the Assembly agenda will act to confirm that reality: today, we talk about the past; tomorrow, we talk about the past. It is truly depressing. The DUP needs to make up its mind on this issue. On the one hand, many of its political representatives have publicly stated that a line needs to be drawn; that the past is too big and too dark to be dealt with. Those people seek to let the justice system deal with its residue. On the other hand, some of them come before the Assembly with a motion that seeks a wider discussion on the past. The DUP needs to make up its mind. Contradictions on its position amid the complexity of the past will inevitably lead to one place, and that is a dead end. If the underlying spirit of the motion is a recognition by the DUP that it is now serious about finding a way through the legacy of the past, that is to be welcomed. Everyone has a place and a role in this process. That includes the two Governments, as well as we in the North.

It is also important to remember and recognise that, in their defence of the state and the

primacy of the Irish Government, representatives of the Irish state were murdered by the IRA. Although the Irish Government have to fully engage in the process of dealing with the past, including dealing with the difficult issues openly and honestly, it is important to remember that the Irish Government and their forces stood resolutely against those who would undermine the legitimacy of that government. I think of Garda McCabe and his widow, and the many others who stood against illegal private armies in the Irish state. It is important that we all acknowledge the sacrifice that was made in defence of the Irish state by members of an Garda Síochána and the only legitimate Óglaigh na hÉireann: the Irish Defence Forces.

For many in my community, it is very difficult to accept a motion from Gregory Campbell that talks about dealing with the past and the Smithwick tribunal. He has repeatedly failed to accept the findings of the Saville inquiry, an inquiry that was set up by a British Prime Minister and the findings of which were accepted by another British Prime Minister and many unionist politicians. We should all be prepared to accept the findings of such inquiries, whatever those findings might be. We will do that with Smithwick, but we will wait for its report before we pass judgement.

The Irish Government undoubtedly have a major role to play in any conversation, debate or structure that seeks to effectively deal with the corrosive legacies of the past. However, the DUP motion seeks to frame the use of the past narrowly for the purpose of the party's own political bias. It is a selective use and abuse of history that seeks to aid its present political position. There is no harm here in calling a spade a spade: nationalists and republicans have also been guilty of that tactic. This is why it is so important to finally roll up our sleeves and deal with the issues once and for all. That should be the outcome of the motion and debate.

Lord Morrow: I believe that the debate is important and very timely. We hear much today about apologies and who should apologise to whom, and there is much debate in the public domain about that. However, I think that sometimes an apology that is not delivered with sincerity becomes quite meaningless. Of course, an apology is much more effective if it is not asked for, but, in this case, it has to be asked for.

For Mr McDevitt's benefit more than anybody else's, it should be said that, when partition occurred in Ireland in 1921, the then Protestant population of what became the Republic of

Ireland was something like 12%. The population there today is in the region of 2%. I am sure that Mr McDevitt will be interested in and take note of that. One must ask him why that is. Why has the Protestant population in Southern Ireland diminished to 2%? Is it because they felt unwanted? Is it because they felt isolated? Is it because they had been marginalised and pushed out? It may be that an apology in that respect would not be out of place —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes, I will come to you in a moment or two. The motion before us calls on the Republic of Ireland Government to address the role that they played in the emergence of the Provisional IRA.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Lord Morrow for giving way. Indeed, I acknowledge that, and it is deeply regrettable that there was movement both ways at the time of partition. I am a Southerner and not a Northerner because my great-grandfather and grandfather and all his family were forced to leave Belfast as a result of partition. They had no choice; they had been interned and were sent south. So, it is a sad reality that partition did not just draw a line in the map but sent families to the wrong side of the border; if not, I would be sitting here as a proud Belfast man.

Mr Speaker: Lord Morrow, you have an extra minute on your time.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I heard Mr McDevitt, and I am sure that he will be the first to acknowledge that today the Catholic population in Northern Ireland is in excess of 40%. So, your population continues to grow, while across the border the Protestant population continues to diminish. You may want to have a study on that sometime.

It would be difficult to find anyone out there, particularly in the unionist community and, I suspect, in the nationalist community, who does not believe that the Dublin Government played a significant role in the support of the Provisional IRA not only by permitting their territory to be a sanctuary for those who were on the run and wanted for questioning but, indeed, by actively supporting it by way of funding, equipping and providing moral backup.

Indeed, the constitution of the Republic of Ireland gave legal endorsement to the IRA's activities.

7.15 pm

It was no less than the then Prime Minister Charles Haughey and his helpers who helped to form and fund the Provisional IRA and openly supported them. In more recent times, we have only to look at the Smithwick tribunal and the stark revelations that have come from it. If the Irish Republic is to build a lasting and sustainable relationship with this region of the United Kingdom, they must grasp this nettle and deal very succinctly with their role in the past 40 years during the terrorist campaign. They need to address their role in border territories, such as Armagh, Fermanagh and Tyrone.

A prime example of how on-the-runners felt at ease in the Irish Republic are the actions of Owen Carron and Gerry McGeough, who were able to gain government employment in that state. Carron secured a post as a teacher in Cavan while still wanted in Northern Ireland for questioning for serious terrorist-related activities. He remains wanted to this day. McGeough, despite having served sentences for criminal and terrorist activity abroad, managed to gain a government-supported post in the Irish Republic. There are two clear examples of the Irish Government giving more than tangible support. It was only when McGeough crossed the border to contest an election, as something of a maverick republican, that he was arrested at the Omagh court. He was subsequently convicted of the attempted murder of then postman Sammy Brush, who today serves as a DUP councillor on Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member confirm that that is the same man whom the SDLP petitioned the Secretary of State to have released?

Lord Morrow: Yes, and I hope that Mr McDevitt takes note of that and talks to his colleagues about it.

Alas, there was no co-operation whatsoever in handing those people back to the neighbouring jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. Numerous examples of the Republic's ambiguity and turning of a blind eye could be given. An apology will not put wrongs right, but it will be an indication of genuineness in the desire to move forward and will send out a clear signal that things will be different in the future.

Straying slightly from the terrorist issue, but no less a terrorising situation, I give the example of the Republic's attitude to the paedophile priest Father Brendan Smyth. Again, there was no co-operation on that very serious issue.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Lord Morrow: I recognise that my time is gone. There is much more that could be said, and there is much more that I would like to say, but I suspect that some of my colleagues will say it in the winding-up speech.

Mr Irwin: As a Member who represents an area that bore the brunt of the IRA's bloody and violent campaign of criminality, murder and assault, I welcome the opportunity to comment in this debate, and I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion.

The motion speaks of improved relations with the Republic of Ireland, and it must be said that improved relations are evident across many sectors of life in Northern Ireland. The Queen's enthusiasm for her visit to the Republic of Ireland was embraced by the Irish Government and by the Irish people, who expressed their delight at the visit. On numerous news reports, it was difficult to find someone who had a negative take on the visit. Perhaps, that is hardly surprising, given how much UK life and culture is observed south of the border now. Admit it or not, attitudes are changing, and they have changed immeasurably over the past few years. This is an opportune time to have the conversation with the Irish Government over their past actions or, in this case, past inaction.

I remember listening on many occasions to news reports of our gallant security forces being targeted by the IRA in a most cold and calculated fashion. After the bomb had been detonated or the shots had been fired, the perpetrators would hotfoot it like the cowards they were to the safety and security of the Irish Republic. At the time, it was frustrating for me listening to the news, so how much more frustrating was it for the RUC and UDR, who wanted to apprehend those murderers but could not do so due to the blatant disregard shown by the gardaí, the Irish Government and the Irish justice system? How much more frustrating must it have been for the families of people cut down by the IRA? Many of them still wait for justice. I think, especially at this time, of the innocent victims of the Kingsmills massacre. Indeed, I am sure that many watched a programme on UTV, just a couple of

weeks ago, which investigated the Narrow Water massacre, in which 18 young soldiers were killed. Two men, Brendan Burns and Joseph Brennan, were arrested in the Irish Republic minutes afterwards. Despite having firearms residue and ammonium nitrate on their clothing, both were charged only with motoring offences. Indeed, two years later, attempts made to extradite Burns were thwarted by the Irish Republic.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will.

Mr Bell: The Member might reflect, just for a second, on another area in his constituency, Blackwatertown, where my grandfather Henry Bell had a business. They were the only Protestant family in Blackwatertown. The entire staff employed by my grandfather in the business, which sold oil, ironmongery, furniture and gent's drapery, and contained a post office, were Roman Catholic. In the 1930s, the IRA held my grandmother at gunpoint, with 12 children in the house. It was only because of an incident in which my aunt Olive drowned in the Blackwater river that my grandfather Bell sold the business, because he could no longer live beside the river in which his daughter had drowned. The INLA came into that business, as they did to so many Protestant businesses along the border. It told the owner to sell but he refused, so men came in and shot and fatally injured John Brown at the counter at which my father used to serve. He was shot not because he was a member of the security forces or politician, but in a simple act of ethnic cleansing by republican terrorists.

Mitchel McLaughlin may read out a history of woes, but I think that there is a time to accept that republican terrorists were involved in pure sectarian murder and ethnic cleansing. There was no justification for it. Those terrorists went back across the border and lived in the safe haven of the Republic of Ireland. I understand the Irish Republic's shame, which is that it gave birth to the republican terrorists who did that —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: — but it is now time for an apology and healing.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say to the Member and the House that interventions must not be statements. Interventions should be very sharp, to the point and on the subject matter that is on the Floor. Mr Irwin has a minute added to his time.

Mr Irwin: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I fully understand where my colleague is coming from. That happened on hundreds of occasions across Northern Ireland.

I will return to the issue that I was speaking about. Burns later blew himself up with his own bomb, but not before killing at least another 12 people.

Sinn Féin speaks about being the party of justice. We hear of its campaigns for justice for this or that, but it presents a fatally flawed version of truth and justice. Its version of justice puts the actions of the IRA beyond the reach of justice. Sadly, successive Irish Governments displayed this same arrogance and hypocrisy.

Our British Government, from which the Assembly draws its power, have been leading the charge for accountability and retrospective apology for many past decisions. Most recently, the Prime Minister apologised for the failings surrounding the Hillsborough disaster. That was certainly right and proper, and it has given the families of the tragedy's 96 victims a sense of closure and an opportunity to continue to fight for justice. It appears that time has moved on sufficiently for such steps to be taken, yet the question rightly asked is this: why has it taken so long for such steps to be taken? The Government of the Irish Republic have been slow to accept blame or any sense of responsibility for their negligence in pursuing terrorists in their jurisdiction.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Irwin: I want to take this opportunity to remind the Taoiseach that the political leader of the Irish Republic holds a collective responsibility for the successive failings of past Governments in addressing this important issue. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: I totally support the motion. I think that it is indisputable that the Irish Government have much to apologise for. Their telling silence speaks volumes about their moral standing.

We speak, of course, of the need to apologise for what was done in the past. It is indisputable that they were utterly involved in the birth and creation of the Provisional IRA. You have only to look at the official reason for the acquittal of Haughey to establish that fact and put it beyond doubt. He and his compatriots were acquitted on the basis that what had been done was done

with appropriate state sanction. If it was done with appropriate state sanction, there is no escape for any Irish Government from what was done, which was the providing of funding to buy arms. So it may not be a question of just an apology; it should maybe also be a question of reparations because, in an international law situation, here was a state funding the creation of a terrorist organisation in another state. That is a major issue, for which the very least that should be offered is an apology. That was compounded by the farcical use, or misuse, of extradition and then, come the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, put to quite cynical political use as a bargaining chip for doing some of the right things on security co-operation and extradition — they sought to bargain that against involvement in the political affairs of Northern Ireland. Not only was that morally bankrupt at the outset, it was turned to political advantage, to their continuing opprobrium thereafter. The Dublin Government should, most assuredly, apologise. It is a matter of deep regret that the Irish Prime Minister did not take the golden opportunity of last Thursday to do what he ought to have done in that regard.

Of course, it has been said, and it bears repetition, that they are not the only people who need to apologise. Apology could do with starting a lot nearer to home. There are Members in the House — right within the House, right within the Executive, right within OFMDFM — who could and should apologise for their presiding over the sectarian murderous campaign of the IRA. So as well as demanding an apology from the Irish Government, let us demand from those closer to home, whatever the political embarrassment, that they front up and face up to that for which they should apologise. Maybe that would bring it too close to the political bosom of the DUP, but that is a matter for them.

Lord Morrow talked about Mr McGeough and Mr Carron getting government jobs in Ireland. Good point — made by the wrong party. The DUP is the party that put Martin McGuinness into his job in this House. Be that as it may, the focus of the motion is absolutely right: the Southern Government should unequivocally, without hesitation, and because by civilised standards it is the right thing to do, now apologise for their complicity in the formation and facilitating of the Provisional IRA and in the refusal to extradite them on the most shoddy of grounds for all those years and then seeking to turn that to their own political advantage.

Mrs Foster: I did not intend to speak to the motion, because my colleague Lord Morrow had indicated that he was going to. However, I

want to address some of the issues that arose in the course of the debate. Mitchel McLaughlin sought to put a smokescreen around the previous motion before the House. That motion, brought by his party, called on the British Government to take actions in relation to a visa waiver scheme. He then stands up and says that they brought it forward in relation to the Irish Government. The Member should read the Order Paper before he makes such statements.

7.30 pm

I cannot say that I am surprised by the Alliance Party's position, but it is taking a particularly one-sided view of apologies. As Mike Nesbitt pointed out, it is OK for the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to apologise, but, apparently, it is not all right for the Irish Prime Minister to apologise or to acknowledge. I am not surprised by that, but I am continually disappointed by the Alliance Party.

The SDLP contributors to the debate made comments about confusion on these Benches. I find their hypocrisy amazing on two counts. Again, they talk about Bloody Sunday, the tribunal and the apology, but we are not allowed to ask for an apology for what went on in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland over the past 30 or 40 years. I find that incredible.

I also find it incredible, as my colleague pointed out, that the SDLP should seek the early release of Gerry McGeough, a man who was rightly convicted by a court of law for the attempted murder of my dear friend and colleague Sammy Brush. What is that all about? I simply cannot get to the bottom of the SDLP's decision to petition the Secretary of State for the release of a dissident republican terrorist who was rightly put in prison. That is quite incredible.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Enniskillen bomb. The Historical Enquiries Team hopes to report before that anniversary and bring forward some information. However, the families of the innocent victims who were murdered on that day know fine well that those who committed the atrocity planned it in the Republic of Ireland and escaped there as cowards after that event took place.

I very much hope that we will have an apology from the Republic of Ireland. Many Members will know that Danny Kennedy and I met the Irish Prime Minister last year, and I intend to travel to Dublin on 16 October with a group of victims' families from the South East Fermanagh Foundation and will be very proud

to do so. They, of course, will want to push again for an apology. Mr Allister said that he regretted that an apology had not been achieved last Thursday, but we will push again on that apology or acknowledgement, which we should, of course, get.

Part of any such apology must refer to and acknowledge the ethnic cleansing by the Provisional IRA that took place along the border, and particularly along the Fermanagh border. Although I do not expect the Irish Prime Minister to apologise for the Provos, we will ask that the Irish Government acknowledge their acts of commission in relation to collusion and their acts of omission in not seeking to secure the border of the Republic of Ireland.

The result of those acts of omission was the calculated targeting of only sons of Protestant families who were murdered by cowards in the night who then, quite literally on some occasions, ran across the border. Some hid in sheughs on their way to murder innocents and were detected by the forces of law and order before they could run to the Irish Republic for safety. Indeed, when the IRA came to murder my father, an only son who lived on a farm, they escaped to the Republic of Ireland.

That, Mr Eastwood, is a fact. It is not a perception; it is a fact. Nobody was there to stop the car or to arrest the murderers. Nobody was there. That is the story of the Fermanagh border in the 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s. Nobody was there. Security was not an issue that the Republic's Government got involved with when Protestant only sons were being ethnically cleansed from the area —

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

Mrs Foster: — but when there was an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, Mr Speaker, all of a sudden there was a lot of security along the border.

I could go on and talk about extradition and about ballistics, as Mr Kennedy did.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Foster: I support the motion and the House should support it.

Mr Lyttle: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to the motion. The Alliance Party agrees with the recognition that the motion gives to the role that the Irish Government have in dealing with Northern Ireland's past. However, in moving the motion, Gregory Campbell himself

recognised that it cannot be a selective approach. The Alliance Party does not take a selective approach to this issue.

I say sincerely that I am passionately angry about the brutality, division and waste that was foisted on all people in this community and that my generation inherits from all people. I could never have thought that I would stand in so many debates of this nature in the House. We have to find a way of dealing with this issue, with mutual respect and in a comprehensive manner, or we will continue to be shackled in our efforts to build a more shared and prosperous community instead of tackling the common enemy of ongoing division and economic difficulty.

The Queen's visit to the Republic of Ireland highlighted how much progress has been made in Anglo-Irish relations. It would be foolish to assume that profound hurt and anger are not still felt by many victims and survivors at the actions or inaction of both states. However, the Alliance Party believes strongly that the role of the Irish Government must come in a comprehensive mechanism and overarching process for dealing with the past within which the issue of apologies and justice, which Danny Kennedy and Jim Allister mentioned, should be addressed.

The debate demonstrates starkly that we continue to struggle with the legacy of our past in a piecemeal way; we continue to revisit deep hurts and injustice. I agree with Colum Eastwood that we cannot continue to have the same debates with the same story of hurt and pain. Surely we, as elected representatives, can show mature leadership to change this narrative for future generations.

We need an overarching process that is capable of listening to all families in order to deal with the divisions in wider society and to learn the lessons of the past. That process could include investigation, information recovery and the examination of key thematic issues. It is also important to note that deep division and deprivation affect our entire community and economy. Therefore, we want a framework that includes an independent body that will take forward those key issues.

It is the Alliance Party's belief that the British Government, the Irish Government, the Assembly and international friends have the creativity, ability and sensitivity to seek a way forward on this issue. I agree strongly with my colleague Stewart Dickson that it is time for a true and comprehensive reconciliation process in Northern Ireland. Many Members recognised

the merit of the amendment that we tabled today; I urge them to reconsider and support it. There is another opportunity for this House to show leadership to all victims and survivors for future generations and to send out a clear message that we are willing to deal with our past together.

Mr Elliott: This issue goes to the heart of much of what has gone on in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic, for almost 40 years. Much has changed in the relationship between the people of Northern Ireland and the people of the Republic of Ireland and their Government, and that must be recognised. However, there is more that can, and needs to, be done.

I listened to Mr Campbell move the motion, and I thank him and his colleagues for proposing it. He highlighted the role that the Irish Government played in conjunction with the Provisional IRA in the early days of the Troubles. As my party leader, Mike Nesbitt, said, if there were recognition of that and an apology for it, it could move the process forward, build better relationships and, hopefully, improve what we have here. I listened to my colleague Danny Kennedy explain in graphic detail the issues around Kingsmills. No one in the House or outside it could fail to be touched by that. We heard of the devastation on families. If the Irish Government had any part to play in that, they should apologise for and recognise that. That is only fair and right to those people and to those victims.

I listened to Stewart Dickson propose his amendment. Although I appreciate the perspective that he took, it is moving the argument away from the motion, which calls for an apology from the Republic of Ireland. To the Alliance Party, the past needs to be dealt with.

The most surprising contribution came from Mitchel McLaughlin, although perhaps it should not have been surprising. He attempted to justify the 30 years of violence in this Province, and he did so very poorly. I ask each and every Member: was there any justification for the murder of those people at Kingsmills? Was there any justification for the murder of Lord Mountbatten? Was there any justification for the countless other murders that took place in this Province, which we have to accept that the Irish Government may have had some role in, whether covertly or overtly?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: If you are very brief.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will be. I refer you to the Hansard report because I made no effort to justify violence. I talked about the violence that engulfed our entire society, and I talked about people being hurt by protagonists on all sides. I then developed the thesis that it is only when we devise a truth recovery process that recognises that there was cause and effect and that there was violence on all sides that we will find the truth that will allow us to reconcile. I said that on the record.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an minute added to his time.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I took from Mr McLaughlin's contribution that he was attempting to justify it and to blame unionists for 30 years of terror and violence in this community. That is what his contribution was about, and I, for one, do not accept that, and I hope that the rest of the House does not accept it. There was no justification for those murders. There was no justification for the murder of police officers such as Mr Breen and Mr Buchanan. There was no justification for the blowing-up of a young lady named Sylvia Crowe, whom other Members will know of, on the road from Rosslea to Lisnaskea. I cannot accept that argument whatsoever.

I listened to Mr McDevitt and his colleague Mr Eastwood. I appreciate Mr McDevitt's comments that we cannot continue in a game of ping-pong. Although I accept that, I was slightly surprised to hear Mr Eastwood claim that the SDLP will accept any findings from any inquiry. By and large, some of those findings may not be to its taste. I do not think that he and his party accepted the findings of the earlier inquiry into Bloody Sunday. You need to be careful about how you frame that.

Mr Eastwood: Will Mr Elliott accept that we did not accept the findings of the Widgery tribunal and that, now, neither does the British Prime Minister, the British Parliament, the world's media and many unionists?

Mr Elliott: Mr Eastwood, you said that you would accept the outcome of any inquiry, but it is quite clear that you have not. That is the reality of the situation.

I heard a number of references to the Smithwick tribunal, and one quotation emerging from the Smithwick tribunal was when it heard evidence from a former police officer who

claimed that the then Taoiseach viewed the Narrow Water attack as a political crime and told the gardaí not to co-operate with the RUC. I know that the findings of that inquiry still have to emerge, but such issues are shocking to me and to the wider public.

At the start, I said that there are improved relations between the Republic of Ireland, the Irish Government and what we have here in Northern Ireland, but there are opportunities —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Elliott: — to build better relationships. Now is the opportunity for them to put a final nail into that and say that they apologise, that they were wrong and that they utterly condemn that violence and condemn their actions.

7.45 pm

Mr Storey: I heard much in the House this evening about leadership. It is often the case that Members on the opposite Benches lecture us about leadership in our community, and we have heard others in the House talk about giving leadership. It is very sad that, when the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic had the opportunity last week to show leadership, he miserably failed the test.

I grew up with an old phrase over the years that said that the activities of the IRA and their political allies were "inextricably linked". This evening in the House, it goes beyond doubt that the Irish Government in the days of Jack Lynch were inextricably linked to the murderous campaign that ended up leaving hundreds of our people in their grave.

Mr McDevitt said that this is a sad night for the House. It is indeed that. We never, as a society, should have been brought to the place where Members such as Mr Eastwood could justify carrying the coffin of people who were involved in the most heinous crimes and people in the House could try to justify the mass murder in Kingsmills as somehow beneficial to the progress of some political ideology. There needs to be a reality check.

As a young person growing up, I heard about the discrimination that supposedly took place in the 60s and about how Roman Catholics were so put upon, marginalised, isolated and badly done to. That never justified one death caused by the Official IRA, the Provos or any other illegal organisation in the history of Northern Ireland. Members on the opposite Benches can

sit as though they can throw their head back, but there are Members in the House who need to face up to the truth of what they have done, what they have been involved in and what they know.

Let us keep the focus on the Irish Government for a moment or two. Let us not forget that Neil Blaney, who, I understand was the Minister for Agriculture in the Irish Republic at the time, said:

"The procurement of arms ... was on. I knew very few people who did not have that view".

He went on to say:

"We ... accelerated by what assistance we could have given, their emergence as a force."

There is no shame or remorse but justification. Blaney also famously or, more accurately, infamously said:

"No one has the right to assert that force is irrevocably out ... The Fianna Fáil party has never taken a decision to rule out the use of force if the circumstances in the Six Counties so demand".

I assume that the "Six Counties" that he referred to is Northern Ireland. Blaney also said that, if a situation were to arise in which the people who did not subscribe to the unionist regime were under sustained and murderous assault, then, as the Taoiseach said on August 13, "We cannot stand idly by". Regrettably, that is what the Irish Government did not do. They did not idly stand by but engaged in a process of assistance and encouragement that led to the graves of those killed at Kingsmills and to the murder of those who sat in Darkley. What was their crime? Worshipping God and being a Protestant on a Sunday evening. What was the crime of the Orangemen in Tullyvallen? They were Protestants and legitimate targets. Do not let the Members on the opposite Benches ever forget that that was what their colleagues —

Mr Speaker: The Member should not point across the Chamber.

Mr Storey: — said about the campaign.

We have heard much said this evening by other Members of the House. I want to just highlight a few comments. Danny Kennedy rightly referred to Kingsmills. None of us should ever forget what happened there. Remember, if we

ever need to be reminded of the reason for what happened at Kingsmills, that it was only the Protestant workmen that they were interested in. What does that tell us about the IRA campaign which the Irish Government did nothing to prevent or stop? It was about the ethnic cleansing of Protestants from along the border.

Mitchel McLaughlin did as republicans normally do. He engaged in a case of classic diversion, denial and confusion. It was not even clear what the previous debate held in the House was all about. He then tried to somehow cause a diversion and distract from the reality of the situation. The motion clearly calls on the Irish Government to face up to their responsibility. They should face up and do what they should have done a long time ago and say to the people of Northern Ireland, "We are sorry for what happened. We are sorry for the way in which we overlooked. We conveniently decided to oversee or, somehow, ignore the fact that members of our Government were involved". They were senior members of the Irish Government. Blaney was a senior member; others involved with him were also senior members of the Irish Government. It may be uncomfortable for those who give allegiance to that state to face up to it this evening, but I will not leave the House tonight with a sense of guilt and shame as a unionist. As a young boy, I grew up listening to all that was being said, alas, by the former leader of the SDLP and others, republicans and nationalists, who somehow tried to heap guilt on me as a unionist, as though we had been compliant in something that was heinous and awful, something akin to being taken into the gas chamber. Are the Irish Government now prepared to face up to the truth of what they did? Much has been made, this evening, of a change in the atmosphere, the relationship or the dynamic between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. If the Irish Government are prepared to face up to what they did, that would be welcome. However, I am sad to say that tonight, as we stand in the House, there is a trail of blood that leads all the way to the door of the Irish Government in Dublin.

We, as unionists, will no longer take lectures from others about leadership until those who are in a position of leadership are prepared to do the honourable and right thing: to come clean. There are Members of the House, along with the Irish Government, who need to come clean about their murky past. What was the crime of Mr Gillespie of Londonderry, who was taken as a human bomb to the border? What was his crime? It is for others to try to justify the unjustifiable.

I thank those who have taken part in the debate and made a valid contribution. My party will accept the amendment of the Ulster Unionist Party, but we cannot accept the Alliance Party's amendment, because it is, alas, like the Alliance Party's politics —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — only another whitewash and another way of trying to hide from reality. I support the motion as amended.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, Members should note that both amendments may be made.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 56; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Elliott and Mr Kinahan

NOES

Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr Molloy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Moutray and Mr Storey

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr Molloy

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the improved relations with the Republic of Ireland; further welcomes the success of the visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the Republic of Ireland in 2011; notes the apologies from the United Kingdom Government in relation to the Bloody Sunday and Claudy bombing events;

further notes with concern the recent evidence given to the Smithwick tribunal regarding a lack of support for the investigation of terrorist suspects; believes that relations would improve further if the current Government of the Republic of Ireland were to address the role played by the Irish Government of the day in the emergence of the Provisional IRA and the roles of past Governments regarding the pursuit of terrorists; and calls on the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland to issue an apology.

Adjourned at 8.19 pm.



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