

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 30 April 2012
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Contents

Matter of the Day

Newry Bomb	207
------------------	-----

Assembly Business

Use of Electronic Devices	210
Committee Membership.....	211

Committee Business

Standing Orders	212
-----------------------	-----

Private Members' Business

Taxation: Charitable Donations	214
Tourism: "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming"	224

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development	236
Finance and Personnel	243

Private Members' Business

Tourism: "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming" (<i>continued</i>)	249
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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 30 April 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Newry Bomb

Mr Speaker: Mr Dominic Bradley has sought leave to make a statement on the Newry bomb, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Mr Bradley to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call Members from the other parties, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. As Members will know, there will be no opportunities for interventions, questions or a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leat as an deis cainte a fháil ar an ábhar thábhachtach seo.

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to comment on this very serious matter. I will begin by condemning outright and forthrightly those who planted or abandoned a 500-lb bomb on the Fathom Line, the road between Newry and Omeath, last Friday. The bomb was destined to cause death and destruction somewhere in this land. The SDLP, as you know, Mr Speaker, has always condemned political violence. We said that it was wrong in the past, and we say that it is wrong now.

After enduring 30-plus years of violence, the public, including the people in my Newry and Armagh constituency, are utterly repulsed at the thought of violence being used here again. Violence has been rejected by the people in both jurisdictions on the island, and those who seek to further their aims in that way should listen to the people and desist from what they are doing immediately.

Dissent must be channelled through exclusively democratic and peaceful means. Murdering police officers, planting bombs and causing destruction to property are not acts of dissent but acts of death and destruction.

I thank the police for their work at the weekend, and I will be meeting them shortly to discuss the detail of it. I also thank the army technical officer who put his life at risk to defuse the bomb and make it safe.

The one vital element that will further address the dissident threat is information. It appears that there has been an escalation in dissident activity and threat. Therefore, it is especially important that anyone who has any information, however slight, brings it to the PSNI in the North and to an Garda Síochána in the South. Doing that is an important element in defeating the threat. We are grateful to all those who work to keep us safe day and daily. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Givan: I and my party associate ourselves with everything that the Member said regarding the incident. We, too, condemn the reckless act by the terrorists who planted the bomb and abandoned it in the way in which they did. It was a clear attempt to take Northern Ireland back to the past, but nobody here wants to go back to the way that things were. The peace that has been won has been hard fought, and nobody should be allowed to put that in jeopardy.

I commend the member of the public for demonstrating vigilance and contacting the police, and I commend the police for the way in which they responded to the incident. My party is concerned about the bomb's sophistication and about how it came about. We want to be assured that the police can effectively combat the threat that exists. The Executive have shown their commitment by giving additional funding to the police. Additional funding to deal with the terrorist threat was fought for with the Treasury.

As I said, we want to be assured that the police can combat the threat that exists, and we will provide whatever support is necessary to assist the police in that.

It is a reminder to us that we must redouble our efforts to ensure that this place works for the people of Northern Ireland and that those who want to take us back do not achieve their aim. We can show that the fundamentals of democracy work and that their attempts to take us back will not succeed.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also agree with some of the remarks expressed and share the condemnation of the bomb that was left on the roadside on the Fathom Line. There is an overwhelming sense of relief in the Newry area that the attack did not reach its intended target or have the undoubtedly devastating consequences that it could have had had it gone off.

There is a sense of anger and bewilderment that people are continuing to try to mount attacks at a time when there is no rationale for them. These sporadic, ongoing attempts to cause destruction of property or death seem designed only to prove that the people involved can do it. There is no other coherent strategy involved. There is no rationale or clear intended outcome behind them, and, crucially, there is absolutely no support across the community for the continuation of that type of attack. Therefore, we can only speculate about what the intended target was, and we can be relieved that that was not achieved, because it would have caused widespread destruction to the Newry area or widespread loss of life.

It is clear that people have moved on. A peaceful political path remains open to all those involved. While there is an honourable position by which people can dissent and disagree with the political process and engagement with policing, they also have a responsibility to offer a rationale. While no one has claimed responsibility for this incident or offered any rationale, neither have those who dissent from this process offered any rationale behind the occurrences. If they have a different means, or if what we are doing here is so wrong, and if our engagement with policing and the political process is so wrong, others are duty-bound to spell out how incidents such as these are a better approach.

I repeat my expression of relief that this attack did not go ahead or reach its intended target.

I know there had been some concerns in the area in relation to police responses to these incidents, and we have articulated those. I know that some of our Sinn Féin elected representatives have met the police over this incident, and we will continue to raise those concerns with police. However, I think that the overwhelming sense is that the people who have put the lives and property of the people of the Newry area in jeopardy are those who left the bomb on the Fathom Line: that is directly where responsibility lies. The overwhelming message from the people of the Newry and Armagh area is that those people should desist from that type of activity.

Mr Kennedy: As a representative for the Newry and Armagh constituency, I, on behalf of my party, join others in expressing strong condemnation of the intended attack on the outskirts of Newry last weekend. The impact that a potentially lethal bomb of that size, some 600 lb, could have had on lives or property is unthinkable.

I join others in thanking and expressing gratitude to the army bomb disposal team, the PSNI and the individual who, due to concern that the vehicle posed a danger, raised the alarm. It is very clear that this is the latest in a series of planned operations in the Newry area by so-called republican dissidents. I do not believe that they have any widespread public support. Nevertheless, their actions, intent and capability represent the ability to wreak havoc not only along the border or in Newry but all over Northern Ireland. Therefore, I strongly believe that there needs to be a security response, a police response and a community response. I very much welcome the statements that indicate that people should co-operate fully with the PSNI in identifying those responsible for these actions. I do not believe that republican dissidents are in the market for some kind of negotiation or political dialogue. Those people are dedicated terrorists; they have set their face against the political and constitutional settlements that operate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the appropriate response has to be a security response and a policing response in conjunction with the local community.

I heard what I think were unfair criticisms of the police response to the incident. To that, I simply say that police resources in the area are stretched. Political figures and parties have supported the reduction of policing numbers and police stations, particularly in places such as Bessbrook and Keady. We need to work together

to ensure that the appropriate community response and security response will mean that these groups will not be allowed to impose their will.

Mr Dickson: I thank Mr Bradley for bringing this matter to the Assembly this morning and allowing us to speak with a united voice in condemnation of those who attempted to carry out a bombing. Regardless of whether it was destined for Newry or somewhere else in Northern Ireland, the bomb would only have had one consequence, which would have been death and destruction. That, indeed, is all that those who attempt to make and manufacture those bombs can offer this society.

12.15 pm

I join others in thanking the PSNI; their colleagues across the border in an Garda Síochána; the army, who so bravely dealt with the bomb in this vehicle and, regrettably, deal with bombs on an increasing basis; and the vigilant member of the public who drew it to their attention. It is important that we are all vigilant and that anything that is seen to be out of the ordinary is reported appropriately to the police. If we stand together as a united community, these people will not — must not — be allowed to steal the peace from us.

Mr Allister: It is no thanks to the wicked, evil terrorists who constructed this bomb that, today, we are not marking an episode of mass murder and catastrophic damage. It is thanks, of course, once again, to a group of men whose courage we often take for granted — the army technical officers — that the bomb was successfully defused, and we should all be grateful for that.

This dastardly republican terrorist act is like so many carried out to the Provo template. It is no different from the many, many such bombs planted and constructed by the Provisional IRA. There was no justification then, and there is no justification now, for such involvement in terrorism. People ask why they are doing it. Obviously, they are committed to the cause, the same cause that drove the Provisional IRA. Maybe, in fact, they look at their MP, with his personal experience of unlawful handling of explosives, and maybe they say, "It worked for him". And so it did, because so long as there is a party in government in this country that refuses to disown and to repudiate the terrorism of their IRA, then so long will there be others prepared to be their clones and to carry

on where they left off. As for the godfathers of today's generation of terrorists, the very least they can do is face up to, acknowledge and express regret and remorse over their terrorism and ensure that those they know still to be involved are made amenable for crimes that many of them were never made amenable for.

Assembly Business

Use of Electronic Devices

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the House's first item of business, I want to say something about the use of electronic devices in the Chamber. I wrote to the Committee on Procedures in October last year asking it to consider the use of electronic devices in the Chamber. Taking into account the Committee's views, I have now decided to revise the ruling, which has been in place for many years, prohibiting the use of electronics devices in the Chamber. With effect from today, Members may use small electronic devices, such as a BlackBerry or a tablet computer, in the Chamber. That includes their use in place of written speaking notes in debates in the Chamber.

I am content that such devices can be used discreetly without distracting other Members or without distracting from the business of the House. They must be kept on silent at all times and used in a mode that does not interfere with the audio scheme or the proceedings of the Chamber. However, in line with the Committee's view, laptops may not be used in the Chamber. I want to emphasise very strongly that laptops will not be brought into the Chamber to be used. I expect Members to use permitted devices in a responsible manner and to bear in mind the integrity of the House at all times.

Some Members were keen for the previous ruling to be reviewed so that they could have the flexibility to keep in touch with pressing issues in their constituencies and elsewhere in and around Parliament Buildings. However, I say to Members: that flexibility works both ways. Members should know that, currently, if they want to speak in a debate, they are expected to be present in the Chamber for opening speeches and for winding-up speeches and to remain in the Chamber for at least two further speeches after their own. I have watched all sides of this House and have seen Members come into this Chamber who have not even heard the opening remarks of a particular debate. They get up in their place, say what they have to say and then leave. They do not even have the courtesy to wait to hear at least some of the debate or to hear other Members speaking. We are watching that very carefully. It happens on all sides of the House, and I assure Members that, should it continue, I will deal

with it. It is totally wrong and discourteous to other Members and to this House for Members just to walk into the Chamber, say what they have to say and then leave, not really caring what other Members might say or what the motion or business of the House is. It is the same culprits. So, we are watching Members very carefully on this issue. Engaging in debates is not just about a Member's own speech; it includes listening to others' contributions. With the new freedom to keep in touch with their offices and to do other work, I expect Members to be better able to comply with these conventions from now on.

I hope that the new arrangement will work well and that Members will find it helpful. However, I will keep it under review. If Members are not observing the terms of this ruling, it may be necessary to come back to the issue. I assure Members that we will watch this issue very carefully. If I need to come back to the House, I certainly will.

Finally, I advise the House that IT staff will be present in the Rotunda for the next few weeks to help Members and to ensure that their devices are set to a mode that will not interfere with the audio scheme in the Chamber. I hope that Members now know and understand that they can use specific electronic devices in the Chamber.

Let us move on.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I will read out the next item of business, but I understand that the Member is not in her place to move the motion.

As with other similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, so there will be no debate.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper.

That Mr Chris Hazzard be appointed as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — [Ms J McCann.]

Mr Speaker: Jennifer McCann's is the only name attached to the motion, so it cannot be moved.

Once again, I want to say something about Whips, especially Chief Whips, from all parties. There are occasions in this House when, for whatever reason, a Member is not in their place. I am not saying this because of Jennifer McCann; I am saying this to all Whips of the House in all parties. We have a problem with Whips not attending the Chamber. This is an issue that I raised on a number of occasions some time ago. In fact, if it were not for ourselves and the Clerks at Table, Members from all sides of the House would be missing when it comes to moving motions. If it were not for the Clerks, or whoever is chairing proceedings, realising that the Member is not in his or her place, they would not be here, because the Clerks have to try to see whether they can get Members into the House. It is not the Clerks' job to try to get Members into the House for business. It is up to the Chief Whips of all political parties to make sure that Members, especially their Members, are in the House to do the business of the House.

It is a warning, especially to Members who are Chief Whips of political parties. Clerks continually have to hunt down even Ministers and Members to get them here for the business of the House. Maybe what we should do from now on, to make absolutely sure, is this: if the Chief Whips are not doing their job, we should move on and let the business collapse.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I take it that it is a genuine point of order, Lord Morrow?

Lord Morrow: It is.

Mr Speaker: All right. OK.

Lord Morrow: Just further to your ruling, we have a motion today but the Member is not here to move it. I do not know the reasons for that. It might be unavoidable. However, is there not a simple way around that? When a motion is lodged with the Business Office, more than one name could be attached to it? If that were so, we would not be in this position.

Mr Speaker: I could not agree more. I think Lord Morrow raised this issue at a meeting of the Business Committee some months ago. We said that to all parties, because there were some difficulties when only one name appeared with a motion. Irrespective of what the motion is, it is very useful if one, two or even three names are attached. I say that, not because Jennifer McCann is not in her place this morning, but because this is a general issue that Whips and Chief Whips of parties need to address within their own groups.

Committee Business

Standing Orders

Mr Speaker: Let us move on. We know that the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures is in his place. As the next six motions relate to amendments to Standing Orders, I propose to conduct the debate as follows. I propose to group motions (a) to (f) as detailed on the Order Paper and conduct a single debate. I will then call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move motion (a), and a debate will then take place on all six motions in the group. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I will put the question on motion (a). I will then ask the Chairperson to move formally the remaining five motions in turn, and I will put the Question on each of them without further debate. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): Go raith maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will remain on hard copy for the moment anyway.

I beg to move

(a) In Standing Order 26(1)(a) leave out “a provision of the Northern Ireland Act 1998” and insert “any statutory provision”.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

(b) In Standing Order 27, leave out paragraph (1) and insert —

“(1) Subject to paragraph (1A), the Speaker shall direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded if —

(a) the Speaker is unsure whether or not a question is carried following the collection of voices under Standing Order 26; or

(b) the Speaker’s judgement as to whether a question is so carried is challenged.” [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(c) After Standing Order 27(1) insert —

“(1A) Where a question is put immediately after the result of a previous division is announced, and paragraph 1(a) or (b) applies —

(a) the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded; or

(b) the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and proceed immediately in accordance with paragraphs (4) to (11) and in deciding whether

to direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded under this paragraph, the Speaker shall have regard to any representations made by any party whip.” — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(d) In Standing Order 27(2) line 1, leave out “this direction” and insert —

“a direction under paragraph (1) or (1A)(a).” — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(e) In Standing Order 76, leave out paragraph (1) and insert —

“(1) Any determination made by the Assembly under section 47(2A)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 shall be published in full.” — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(f) In Standing Order 76(2) line 1, leave out “also”. — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring to the House these motions to amend Standing Orders. The first four motions relate to voting in the Assembly and the last two to Members’ remuneration and pensions. That may seem a strange combination, but they have been brought together purely for expedience rather than because of any link between them.

The first motion relates to Standing Order 26(1) (a). That Standing Order provides that every decision of the Assembly is to be taken by a simple majority vote other than a decision where the Northern Ireland Act 1998 or Standing Orders provide otherwise. More recent legislation, such as the Justice Act 2002, the Northern Ireland Act 2009 and the Department of Justice Act 2010 make cross-community support a requirement for certain matters. Standing Order 26(1)(a) is, therefore, no longer accurate and it does not reflect statutory requirements other than those in the 1998 Act. The proposed amendment will remove any conflict by replacing the reference to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 with the words “any statutory provision”. It will also cover any future changes in legislation that impose a cross-community support requirement.

The next three motions — (b), (c) and (d) — relate to Standing Order 27, which sets out the voting procedures for running Divisions in the Chamber. As Members are well aware, when a Question is put and the result is not clear, the Division Bells are sounded and after three minutes the Speaker puts the Question a

second time. If the result still is not clear, or the Speaker's judgement is challenged, a Division is called. Under the current procedure, when a Division occurs immediately after the result of a previous Division, even if it relates to the same subject, the requirement for the three minutes to pass before the Question is put again remains. That means that if, for example, there are two or three amendments to the same motion and the result of the vote is not clear, Members would be waiting in the Chamber for three minutes each time before going through the Lobbies. The Committee on Procedures is of the view that, in those circumstances, the three-minute rule should not be mandatory but should be at the discretion of the Speaker.

12.30 pm

The proposed amendment will give the Speaker, in consultation with the Whips, the flexibility to dispense with the three minutes before putting the Question a second time, where two or more divisions relating to the same subject are to be held in succession. However, there will be times when it may be better to use the three minutes, for example when there is a series of amendments to a Bill and Members may be unclear about how they are voting. In those circumstances, the three minutes would allow the Whips to ensure that their Members know which way to vote. I want to emphasise that, in deciding whether to dispense with the three-minute rule, the Speaker will take into account any views expressed by the party Whips. When the Speaker decides to exercise the discretion to dispense with the three minutes, the Division would proceed immediately in accordance with the procedures outlined in paragraphs (4) to (11) of Standing Order 27. That is, Members would go through the Lobbies to vote as soon as the Tellers have been announced.

The final two motions relate to Standing Order 76, which deals with Members' remuneration and pensions. At present, Standing Order 76(1) requires the Speaker to publish in 'The Belfast Gazette' determinations in respect of Members' salaries, allowances and pensions. However, with the establishment of the independent financial review panel, which now makes such determinations, the publication of determinations in 'The Belfast Gazette' by the Speaker is no longer needed. The proposed amendment removes that requirement on the Speaker but provides that any determination made by the Assembly must be published in full.

The final motion is a minor consequential amendment to Standing Order 76(2). It simply deletes "also" in the first sentence.

Those are, I hope, all straightforward amendments, and I commend the motions to the House.

Mr Gardiner: As a member of the Committee on Procedures, I welcome these changes to Standing Orders. The House is often accused of never taking the simple way forward on anything. Therefore, I fully support the proposals to make the voting methods more efficient. I hope this is the start of an ongoing process that will identify and repair areas of the Assembly's operations that can be further improved. I support the motion.

Mr Clarke: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and I was in my place. I thank the Chairperson for putting forward the motion and Sam Gardiner for his contribution. The motion involved lots of dialogue between the political parties. As was outlined by the Chairperson of the Committee, all the amendments to Standing Orders make common sense. They also make the business of the Chamber flow much more ably, especially when it comes to Divisions. So, I commend the motion put forward by the Chairperson.

Mr Speaker: Before I proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the six motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(a) In Standing Order 26(1)(a) leave out "a provision of the Northern Ireland Act 1998" and insert "any statutory provision".

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(b) In Standing Order 27, leave out paragraph (1) and insert –

"(1) Subject to paragraph (1A), the Speaker shall direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded if –

(a) the Speaker is unsure whether or not a question is carried following the collection of voices under Standing Order 26; or

(b) the Speaker's judgement as to whether a question is so carried is challenged." — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(c) After Standing Order 27(1) insert –

“(1A) Where a question is put immediately after the result of a previous division is announced, and paragraph 1(a) or (b) applies –

(a) the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded; or

(b) the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and proceed immediately in accordance with paragraphs (4) to (11) and in deciding whether to direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded under this paragraph, the Speaker shall have regard to any representations made by any party whip.”. — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(d) In Standing Order 27(2) line 1 leave out “this direction” and insert –

“a direction under paragraph (1) or (1A)(a)”. — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(e) In Standing Order 76, leave out paragraph (1) and insert –

“(1) Any determination made by the Assembly under section 47(2A)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 shall be published in full.”. — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(f) In Standing Order 76(2) line 1, leave out “also”. — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Private Members’ Business

Taxation: Charitable Donations

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

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the proposals by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to limit tax relief on large charitable donations; believes that this could have a devastating impact on charities; and calls on Her Majesty’s Government to abandon this approach.

I am delighted to propose the motion. I am glad, in light of the general admonishment made earlier, that I do not have to join you by Skype or videoconference but have managed to make it here in person and do not have to Facebook my speech in. In light of the nature of the subject, we will not even be adding a smiley face at the end of the discussion.

I welcome the opportunity to raise what I think is a very important issue. I know that some in the media have been critical of the issue because it is not one that we have direct control over, but the impact on local charities could be very significant. I will say more about that in a moment.

There was considerable focus on a number of issues when the Budget was announced. The Government’s point of view was that they were lifting a number of people out of the taxation system or reducing the levels of taxation, but, at a more critical level, there were changes to the top rate of tax, the so-called Robin Hood tax in reverse, which impacted on working pensioners, and the so-called pasty tax, which included an extension of VAT.

The announcement of a change to the tax relief on charitable donations did not initially attract a great deal of attention, although there has been considerable comment subsequently. This issue is close to my heart, as my late father was the covenant secretary of my local Presbyterian church and would have dealt with this issue. He saw the considerable impact of the change to the tax regime brought in by the previous Government.

For those who have not been following this, the Chancellor's intention, as announced in the Budget, is that, from April 2013, the Government would introduce a cap on certain unlimited income tax reliefs. Under the plans, previously uncapped tax reliefs, including charitable donations, would be capped at £50,000 or 25% of a person's income, if that was higher. In a point of unassumed irony, it is due to come in on 1 April 2013, the same time as the reduction in the higher rate of tax from 50% to 45%.

There has been a subsequent firestorm. Treasury Minister David Gauke said that he thought the impact on charities would be in the region of £50 million to £100 million. That is widely disputed by charities across the UK. If the impact is going to be insignificant from the Government's point of view, when that Government deals with a Budget that runs to hundreds of billions of pounds, we have to question why they are pursuing this in the first place. The reality is that the figures are much greater than that. This is not purely linked with the charity aspect, but, in referring to the wider changes, different Treasury figures have been quoted. One set of figures state that, by 2014-15 on one calculation, there could be £870 million worth of a difference. Another set of figures states that, because of the post-behavioural costings, there will be around £500 million of a change. We seem to be awash with figures.

The reality, though, is that this will have a very significant impact. Last year in the UK, in the region of £11 billion was given to charities. I suspect that charitable contributions from Members of the House were not at the level that will be impacted by the proposed tax changes, but, as well as being dependent on relatively small donations from a large number of people, charities are very heavily dependent on quite large donations from a relatively small pool of people. For example, the figures suggest that 45% of the £11 billion given to charities in the past year came from just 7% of donors. From an impact point of view, it is, therefore, not surprising that a lot of the large charities in the UK, such as Cancer Research, Save the Children, Concern Worldwide, the National Trust, Age UK and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, have all written to show their opposition, as, indeed, have local philanthropists such as Sir George Bain, John Agnew and Angela Chada.

The situation is such that the proposals will not simply impact on the big charities. As Members know, in many cases, a lot of the larger charities have projects that filter down to grass-roots level and use, for example, smaller charities, churches and community organisations to deliver schemes on the ground. So, in Northern Ireland there will be a real impact not just at the higher levels of larger charities but on much smaller charities.

We should recognise the context in which the proposals are set. One researcher described it as a perfect storm for charities. It is hitting at exactly the wrong time, because there is greater demand on charities during a recession. Indeed, according to a recent survey, 69% of charities in the UK have experienced an increase in demand. At the same time, a lot of people's disposal income has been reduced because of the recession. As a result, they have cut back on the things that they see as being non-necessities, including charitable giving, which has reduced to some degree. Thinking about the projected impact, again, a survey found that eight out of 10 philanthropists said that they would rethink their charitable donations and that some would be forced to cut their charitable donations by 40%. So, the proposals could have a very real impact.

As indicated, there has been a high level of concern about and response to the proposals. In the House of Commons, my colleague Jim Shannon and others from across the political spectrum have signed an early day motion expressing concern about them. The proposals have also been opposed by the official Opposition and, as I indicated, by a range of charities. However, it is not just the usual suspects who are critical of the Government. For example, virtually all newspapers from across the political spectrum, including the likes of the 'Daily Telegraph' and the 'Financial Times', have expressed concern. Indeed, those who might be described as conservative commentators, such as Dominic Lawson and Fraser Nelson, who are hardly the type of people to jump on the general opposition bandwagon, have been highly critical of the proposals. I think that there are a number of reasons why they have been critical of the proposals' weaknesses. We are told that the proposals are about ending tax avoidance. Obviously, targeting people who avoid tax is to be welcomed. However, that has been lumped in with targeting people who are attempting to offset some of their tax by putting

it under company accounts or, indeed, by bogus activity. That issue is easily solved. If the idea is to prevent that degree of tax avoidance, the issue of charities, particularly legitimate charities, should be decoupled from that. If there is a concern that bogus charities are in some way being used as a device to avoid tax responsibility, that can be easily dealt with, particularly in Northern Ireland, where we have a commission that looks after charities, while other bodies look after charities' bona fides. The reality is that, on a number of occasions when the Government have been pressed on the number of people that they feel would gain some benefit from this, particularly in the use of charities, they have never been able to produce figures, which suggests that the proposals are like a hammer being used to crack a nut.

Indeed, the practicalities of the proposals have also been criticised by experts in the field, such as the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. So, it appears that the proposals will not work, are ill thought-through and run contrary to the spirit of government policy. We are told that David Cameron's great idea is the big society, in which society contributes a lot more to what is happening on the ground than the Government. However, here we have a device that runs against the level of intended philanthropy. I am not getting into the debate on the lowering of the high level of taxation from 50p to 45p, but it seems that the Government have a remarkable sense of priorities. They reduce the level of taxation for the highest earners in our society, and, at the same time, their one punitive measure for high earners discourages them from giving to charity.

It is clear from some of the remarks that the Government have made and from the indications given by George Osborne and David Cameron that they intend to consult on the issue in the summer, that it is dawning in some people's minds, prompted, no doubt, by parliamentarians of various ilks, that this is a bad idea, and the Government seem to be in slight retreat from it. It is important that, for the sake of the most vulnerable in our society who benefit from a lot of charitable work, the Assembly sends out a clear-cut message about where we stand on the issue.

12.45 pm

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

Mr Weir: The Government were wrong to put this proposal forward in the first place. It is due to take place on 1 April 2013, so there is still time for the Government to withdraw it. I urge the House to support the motion and make that clarion call to the Government.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Mr Weir said, we do not have control over this matter, but it will have an impact here if it comes to pass. Initially, the British Government argued that their purpose and aim was to stop people using bogus charities for their own benefit. If such a problem exists, surely it can be addressed by regulators. It is interesting that almost half of charitable donations come from fewer than one tenth of donors. If tax relief is reduced, it could mean that many donors would simply give less. It is also possible that, with a lower financial commitment, they may feel less motivated to provide time and other assistance.

Charitable donations in Britain lag behind America significantly. To reduce this gap and promote what is called "the big society", surely it would be better to encourage more donations, not discourage those that are already being made. If the new proposals come into force, they will undoubtedly hinder fundraising for many charities. Surely a message needs to go out that philanthropy is essential and should be valued. It appears that the message that will be sent out is that such charitable donations are regarded as some kind of tax fiddle.

According to the Government, the revenue raised if the measure is implemented, when put into context, could be £50 million. That is not a great deal in the overall scheme of things, but charities, as Mr Weir pointed out, would argue that the final figure could be a lot higher. A clear distinction needs to be drawn between charitable giving and other activities that attract relief. Tax breaks that are purely for self-interest need to be separated from those that benefit the wider public.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one of the flaws in the proposal is that any expert who has looked at it will say that the idea of tax avoidance is a red herring? If people give to a genuine charity on that scale, it is mathematically and financially impossible for them to make a gain.

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

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree with him that there is no doubt that it is a red herring. Indeed, when the Charity Commission was set up in the North — it was dealt with by the Committee for Social Development, of which I am a member — there was much debate around what constituted public benefit. That debate is ongoing.

The good intentions of those big donors to charity need to be recognised and applauded, and the Government need to recognise the case for charitable giving. In this time of continuing recession, surely it needs to be recognised that philanthropy has a particular strength in advancing the frontiers of knowledge and promoting artistic endeavours.

Tax avoidance is not the same as donating to charities such as Macmillan Cancer Support, the Red Cross and many others, which rely on the money that they get to carry out their work, which is often about supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Surely the Government should be able to tell the difference between tax avoidance and supporting valuable charity work.

George Osborne has said:

"We've capped benefits. Now it's right to cap tax reliefs, too."

That was said about a Budget in which the taxation rate for the richest was lowered to give them more. To make such a comparison is totally disingenuous, as benefits will be savagely cut, and many vulnerable people will have to cope with reductions in their benefits that will certainly change the quality of their life.

Mr Cree: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the important work of charities in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom, and, in the knowledge that they often rely on the financial support of what has been referred to today as philanthropic giving, we support the motion and commend the Members who tabled it.

Charities are regulated by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, and they seek to deliver:

"A dynamic and well governed charities sector in which the public has confidence, underpinned by the Commission's effective delivery of its regulatory and advisory role."

Therefore, I believe that we have a system in place in which charities operate in a firm and fair regulatory environment where the public can have trust in the fact that, on the whole, charities produce positive and tangible benefits. Indeed, they play an integral part in many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Educational charities such as our universities are essential in providing the economy with the skills and knowledge to grow the private sector and keep Northern Ireland in its current position as a region renowned for its skills base. Others, for example, the Positive Futures programme, address the issues associated with learning difficulties.

Many charities deal specifically with the important issues of poverty and social deprivation. In particular, I mention the Simon Community, which does a great deal of work in my constituency of North Down, as well as the NSPCC and Barnardo's. Aside from the practical help that they provide, these organisations often produce detailed research that can inform and shape government policy. Adequate support of the social economy is also imperative. Although government funding obviously has a role in this, individuals can and do give money to social enterprises. All of these types of charity rely heavily on the goodwill of donors to fund some of their activities, but that may be affected after the proposals outlined by George Osborne in the Budget last month to change the tax relief that donors can receive in respect of large donations to charities. From 6 April 2013, the maximum will be £50,000 a year or 25% of the donor's income. The result of this is a significant decrease in the amount of tax that philanthropists can claim back and, therefore, a reduction in the money given to charities. In this instance, the end result certainly does not justify the means. Tax avoidance should not be tolerated, and I commend any attempt to ensure that those earning the highest incomes pay their fair share, but it seems to me that this particular measure would hinder the very organisations that we should be encouraging.

The PwC report, 'Managing Charities in the New Normal — A Perfect Storm?', which a Member referred to, outlines the fact that the measures that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is seeking to bring in come at the worst possible time. The research shows that 93% of fundraisers say that money was more difficult to raise in the past year and 94% expect it to get harder over the next 12 months. PwC's work also shows that charities believe fundraising to be an important

means of income in the current fiscal climate, with 66% planning to increase their fundraising activity. Therefore, it seems clear that George Osborne's decision will clearly disadvantage the good work that is being done by charities at a very challenging time. Indeed, I am reminded that a previous Labour Chancellor made a similar mistake when he introduced a tax on pension funds. We all know that that has had a devastating effect on all final salary pension schemes.

Mr Weir mentioned that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs could bring in as much as £100 million through limiting tax relief. However, this means that there would be £500 million of lost donations, and we are told that that is a conservative estimate. Indeed, very big sums could be involved, and this is not an acceptable outcome. One positive aspect is that the Prime Minister has indicated that he is willing to listen and that full formal consultation will occur. I certainly hope that he will review his plans on charitable taxation, given that the proposal is not to be introduced until next year. That is what this House is calling on him to do, and I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí a thug faoi bhráid an Tionóil é inniu. I support the motion, and I thank the Members who brought it to the Floor of the House today.

The Chancellor's plan to reduce tax relief on charitable donations has caused considerable opposition from many voluntary and community sector groups which believe that they will lose substantial sums of money as a result. While we value the contribution made to our society by the national health system, the welfare state and other government agencies, the sad truth is that many aspects of our community's health and welfare are not sufficiently funded by government and need to be supported by the voluntary, community and charitable sector — the third sector, as it has become known.

One has little difficulty finding examples from the over 3,000 organisations that are backing the "Give it Back, George" campaign and that benefit from charitable donations. Those organisations deal with research into all types of illness and disease for which there is not yet a cure and for which ongoing research and support are needed. They include organisations

that advance the arts, sports, music and mental health or deal with eating disorders, youth matters, hospice matters, arthritis, carers in general, community development etc. That list is not exhaustive. In many cases, the organisations have arisen from fundraising that has been initiated by the relatives of a sufferer of one of those diseases or disorders or, indeed, sadly, by the relatives of a person whose death has been caused by one of those illnesses. Quite often, a local campaign eventually becomes a national campaign, and a charity is set up.

Although the Government collect less tax as a result of tax relief on charitable donations, major economic support is provided through the scheme to charities that do the important work involved. Of course, if the Government were to cap the relief available on charitable donations, there is absolutely no guarantee that the improved tax take would be redistributed to charities or to the research and development work that many of them currently engage in and fund. It is also important to remember that many of the third sector groups that benefit from charitable tax relief also raise additional funds by other means that add value to the effects of charitable donations. Often, where an organisation requires a cocktail of funding to complete a project, charitable donations are the spur for further donations to complete that cocktail. So, at the end of the day, donations that are encouraged by tax relief enable the third sector organisations to do work that badly needs to be done and that, at the end of the day, results in a lesser drain on government resources.

Under the plans announced in the recent Budget, individuals who give money to charity will only be able to claim tax relief on 25% of their total income or on £50,000, whichever is higher. The cap will be introduced from April 2013 and will apply to gifts of cash and shares. There will be a consultation, and I hope that the views of the Assembly will be included in that.

As other Members said, the proposals are aimed at thwarting people who donate to false charities. However, there is little evidence that that takes place on any great scale. There is a requirement by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) in almost every case that donors must provide the bona fides of the charity to which they are donating.

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

Mr D Bradley: I conclude by reiterating my party's support for the motion, and I hope that the Chancellor will take on board the views of this House.

1.00 pm

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. Critics might contest that there is an air of duplication in the nature of the motion, following a similar debate in Westminster a few weeks ago. However, I commend the Members for bringing the motion to the House. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Indeed, it is something that we in the Alliance Party take great comfort in every time we hear others talking about a shared future.

In recent days, I have been contacted by representatives from a range of charities in Northern Ireland, who are understandably concerned that the proposal will have significant negative consequences for our charitable sector. Although I support the drive to scrutinise unlimited tax reliefs, I would argue that greater and more realistic consideration needs to be given to that specific proposal, taking on board the expertise available within the charitable sector, to ensure that the proposed cap does not hinder the significant work of charities across the UK.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) has recently expressed concerns, supporting the Give it Back, George campaign. It has reasoned that the addition of the cap will serve only as a disincentive to potential philanthropists, with the impact likely to be felt not only by large charities but by smaller voluntary and community groups that benefit from grant-making trusts and foundations.

Our society consistently lags behind our western counterparts, such as the US, in relation to charitable donations and philanthropy. In that regard, it seems that the best way to address that problem would be to encourage more donations, not to discourage those already being made. I know that it could be argued that the upper-rate tax relief cap on donations may only affect a small number of high earners in our society, but, as others have already mentioned, in the UK, nearly half of all charitable donations come from fewer than 10% of donors — those affectionately known as the rich. The media do little to improve the public perception of the wealthy in our society, and, at times, key figures from within the golden ranks do themselves few favours either, but the truth is that, in relation

to this proposal, many of those individuals regularly give away a high percentage of their income. It is large donations such as those that provide the lifeblood to our charitable sector.

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

There is a growing perception that, through donating such large sums to charity and receiving — currently — unlimited tax relief on their donations, wealthy donors are somehow profiting from some fairytale charity loophole. However, as others have said, that is simply not true. The sad reality of reducing tax relief on those donations would mean that many donors would simply give less. There is also an ironic sense of illogicality to the proposals when we seek to align them to the Government's own ambitions for sustainability and growth in the third sector in the hope that it can fill a vital role in the road to economic recovery.

In addition to the financial red tape being tied around charitable foundations, the Treasury has also confirmed that community interest tax relief (CITR) will be included in the proposed cap. For those Members unfamiliar with CITR, the scheme encourages investment in disadvantaged communities by giving tax relief to investors who invest in community development finance institution that, in turn, provide loans to businesses and social enterprises. It almost seems in this instance that, while one hand from Westminster is patting the third sector on the back and seeking to provide assistance and support, the other is tightening the noose around its neck.

I am sure that Members will agree that there is some merit in concerns exercised over bogus and foreign charities being utilised in order to exploit the system, but the frequency and impact of such practices simply does not hold weight when compared to the frequency and impact of charitable giving. The problem of tax avoidance through the use of charitable relief should ultimately be dealt with by an effective HMRC. Having also discussed the matter with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, I have faith in its ability to investigate alleged charity misconduct or mismanagement.

It is my contention that, if we wish to seriously support our charitable foundations and strengthen our third sector, it is vital that we provide them with resolute support in relation to these proposals. The overriding principle in all

of this should not simply be deterring a minority but emboldening the majority. It is on those grounds that I lend my support to the motion.

Mr Ross: It is refreshing that we have support for the motion from all around the Chamber. Indeed, it is perhaps surprising that we are listening to Sinn Féin supporting tax breaks for the wealthy in society. I think that it reflects the outrage among the public about the Government effectively attacking philanthropy in the United Kingdom. Indeed, we heard senior figures rolled out, not so much to defend the policy as to try to explain it and indicate a softening of their position and perhaps a rethink. That, of course, was against the backdrop of former Prime Ministers opposing the policy. Huge amounts of Back-Benchers from all of the main political parties at Westminster indicated their opposition to this move, as did more than 3,000 individuals and charities throughout the United Kingdom.

I believe the decision to be misjudged for two reasons: one of them financial, the other political. The Hudson Institute index of global philanthropy, which counts private donations to overseas charities, shows how generous we in the United Kingdom are. On average, British citizens donate four times as much as Germans, seven times more than Italians and nine times as much as Spaniards. Fund-raising programmes on television, such as 'Sport Relief', 'Comic Relief' and 'Children in Need', show us the huge generosity of the British public when it comes to charitable giving. As Mr Weir said in his opening remarks, they give to the tune of £11 billion annually and huge sums of that come from a small pool of donors — the wealthiest in our society.

I believe it is a misjudgement for the Government to suggest that the wealthiest in our society are giving to charities because of tax reasons. It is wrong to say that. As Mr Bradley said, many individuals choose to give huge sums because they have been touched by a charity or because members of their family have had an illness for which they have received help from one charity or another. I think that that is the primary reason for many people to give; it is not that they will, necessarily, benefit individually. Indeed, the difference between collecting money through the tax system and individuals giving money and getting tax incentives for doing so is that the individual rather than Government can decide how and where their money is spent.

That leads me to the subject of the political difficulty with this proposal. How can the Conservative Prime Minister or Chancellor argue that this is compatible with their notion of the big society? David Cameron launched the Conservative manifesto two years ago this month. At that launch, he said that big government was not the answer to problems, whereas people outside government, such as charities, are the answer to many problems. The concept that voluntary and charity groups can deliver many of the services that government has traditionally delivered, and do so more cost-effectively, is right behind the big society, and I think that there is much merit in it. Large donors — large charitable givers — should be at the heart of big society and should not be those whom the Government tries to attack.

We have to ask why this is happening. It has happened because Conservatives are so worried about being labelled as the party for the rich that they have had to try to close what many have argued is the loophole of the rich using charitable giving to reduce their tax. However, as Members have pointed out, 45% of charitable donations come from only 7% of donors. That corresponds with other countries. The highest rates of charitable donations come where the wealthiest are given tax incentives to do it — the United States is another example — whereas, in countries where the rich are taxed to the highest degree, charitable donations are much lower.

I suggest that it is not particularly wise to suggest that we label as tax dodgers the individuals who are counted on and relied on by charities to ensure that they can deliver their services to communities and those most in need. The Government have made a mistake in doing that. As Members also said, if the Government are concerned that individuals are giving to what they have labelled as dodgy or illegitimate charities, action needs to be taken to ensure that that is not the case. The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland has done a lot of good work to ensure that all registered charities are legitimate, and that is the position that the Government should take. They need to remove this threat of a cap. If they do not, they will have a policy that is not popular. It is not a simplification of the tax system; it is not small government; it is certainly not big society; and it is not common sense.

Mr Copeland: The 19th century novelist Dudley Warner once said:

"It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

The irony of that statement should not be lost on the House. Although the words remain the same, the situation they have been applied to has changed the sentiment.

Let me begin by stating that my party believes that the coalition Government are absolutely right to seek to cut the colossal sums that some of the wealthiest people in the United Kingdom seek to offset against tax. Figures released by the Treasury last Monday prove that the rates of tax avoidance are far higher than it has previously been willing to admit. Indeed, some of the wealthiest, who pay no more than 10% tax, are taxed at a lower rate than their secretaries are.

No one doubts the dire circumstances in which the Labour Government left the nation's coffers and the seemingly near-impossible task of balancing the books. In 2010, the coalition Government inherited a record deficit from the previous Labour Government in 2010. In March, the UK Government borrowed more than £18 billion, which is more than it takes to run everything in Northern Ireland for a year. The total borrowings for the 2011-12 fiscal year came in at just below £126 billion and have added to the total debt of £1.0225 trillion. The fact that hundreds of millions of pounds of income tax is avoided each year by people using seemingly legal loopholes does not help matters.

The clergyman Robert South once said:

"If there be any truer measure of a man than by what he does, it must be by what he gives."

Wealth is not there to feed our egos, but to feed the hungry and to help people help themselves. Giving to charity may be altruistic or self-interested, and it may or may not do good. However, the present system draws in taxpayers' money in the absence of such accountability.

Without doubt, the Chancellor has a duty to control and oversee tax reliefs. Offshoring money in tax havens, offsetting contrived business debts, converting income to capital gains via private equity and scores of other sleight of hand methods need to be controlled and, where possible, stopped. However, by

including charitable donations, the coalition Government have taken a sledgehammer to crack a walnut. In the way in which only they can, they have taken a good proposal and turned it into something that could have a devastating impact on organisations that seek to do good. When combined with the so-called pasty tax and the granny tax, that measure demonstrates that the Budget may have been devised in an environment that is seemingly detached from reality and the difficulties experienced by ordinary people.

The proposal to cap the amount of tax relief that people can receive on charitable donations at £50,000 has the potential to significantly reduce charitable income, particularly for some of the largest and, therefore, best-established charities, including those that deal with issues such as cancer and ex-forces organisations. It could also have a devastating impact on our beleaguered university funding system, which has shouldered its fair share of the reduction in the deficit. That would deliver yet another kick in the face to the aspirations and opportunities of our young people, who are being asked to pay for past fiscal irresponsibilities to which they were not party. The measure also has the effect of potentially demoralising genuine philanthropists by branding them as tax dodgers. Some of the donors who signed a protest letter against the Budget are entirely selfless, shy, retiring and generous and are ready to support unpopular and radical causes with no conceivable payback.

The coalition Government have, quite rightly, moved to take the least well-off in society out of the tax system by raising personal allowances. Yet, at the same time, they are taking away from them, by significantly limiting the resources that charities will have at their disposal.

The Tory Party MP Zac Goldsmith perhaps summed up the reaction to the measure perfectly when he said that if Ministers did not produce a:

"more intelligent measure which deals with the loopholes",

they would be remembered as the Government that "destroyed the charities sector".

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

Mr Copeland: I thank you very much for your time.

Mr Hamilton: I am happy to make the winding-up speech on this debate, which was proposed by Mr Weir and to which my colleague Mr Ross was a signatory. It is right that, during a fairly brief debate, the Assembly has had the opportunity to put forward its concerns about this attack on charitable giving, which we share with many in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. It is only right that we have had that opportunity and that we can reflect those concerns.

1.15 pm

A constant theme throughout the debate has been the real generosity across the United Kingdom. Mr Weir put a tag on that when he said that £11 billion has been raised by charities in the United Kingdom alone. That is a colossal amount of money that is given each and every year to charities across our country. Within that cohort, the Northern Ireland people are exceptionally generous. Mr Ross pointed out that for events like Sport Relief, Comic Relief and Children in Need, every year you see that the tally that is raised in Northern Ireland far exceeds our population share in the United Kingdom. So, you see that our people are exceptionally generous.

A colleague, another member of my party who is here, told me a story one time about how he was acting as a treasurer for a committee that was raising money in his church. His church was allied to a church in Kent, England, in the leafy suburbs of London. It is known as the stockbroker belt and is somewhere you would think there was a lot of money. He said that the donations in the envelopes that came from the people from Northern Ireland far exceeded those from the people from that place in Kent. That is fairly anecdotal evidence that people in Northern Ireland are exceptionally generous, but we can see it backed up by the money raised for events like Children in Need.

As others have mentioned, the closing of this loophole will probably not affect a lot of small, local and perhaps even church-based charities in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there may not be that many people in Northern Ireland who are going to be hit by the closure of this loophole. Many would like to be in the position where they could give away £50,000 or 25% of their income, but the reality in Northern Ireland is that there probably is not the degree of wealth to do that. However, we have seen, experienced and benefitted from philanthropists, to put a collective noun on the people involved. Perhaps

that has been more through the big global or UK-wide charities, where we see some benefit here for people in Northern Ireland directly.

Mr Copeland mentioned universities, and I think of the late Allen McClay, whose generosity allowed a new school of pharmacy to be built at Queen's. There has also been a new investment in libraries, and we saw Mr O'Reilly donating to the brand new library at Queen's. So, we have seen the level of philanthropy that can make a real difference, particularly in our universities and our colleges.

Others have quoted the fact that some 45% of money given to charity comes from 7% of donors, which shows the extent to which we are dependent on philanthropists for charitable donations. The fact that around eight or nine out of 10 philanthropists are saying that they are going to reconsider the amounts that they are giving because of the closure of the loophole should fill us all with some dread about what the impact will be, whether it is on universities, cancer charities or charities for ex-servicemen, which Mr Copeland also mentioned.

The closure of the loophole could not come at a worse time for charities. Even in these difficult times, £11 billion has been raised in the UK over the past year. However, that number is under attack simply as a consequence of the downturn that we are in, because people are questioning everything that they are doing and everything that they are spending money on, including charities. So, this could not come, as Mr Cree said, at a worse time for charities in the United Kingdom.

This measure seems to be somewhat contrary, as Mr Ross pointed out, to the Government's flagship policy of growing a big society. We want charities to step into the breach and do more. Everybody in this House will subscribe to the argument that charities can often deliver public services that we are responsible for in the Assembly better because they have much better contacts in the community and a much better grasp of the subject than any institution or organisation that government can create. The Government have pushed the policy of a big society verbally, but a lot of the things that they have been doing have been contrary to it. There is no greater contradiction than the closing of this loophole or tax relief.

As Mr Bradley pointed out in his comments, the work that charities are doing is saving

government in the United Kingdom and government in Northern Ireland money. It is exceptionally difficult to quantify the contribution that charities make day in and day out by saving us money through the services that they deliver and the support that they give.

So, the measure not only seems contrary to the Government's flagship policy of a big society, but it seems to be attacking their own interests, in that we are quite probably going to see a lot of charities that deliver services across the United Kingdom coming to government, whether that is central government or local government, and saying, "We have had a reduction in the money that we bring in through charitable giving, in part because of the closure of this tax relief loophole, and we now need support from government." Therefore, it becomes a vicious circle rather than a virtuous one.

Judith Cochrane and others mentioned a perception about some of those who give to charity, and I think that everybody would accept that not everyone gives money for altruistic reasons. Some give to charities that are in their business's interest, and others give for reasons of corporate social responsibility, perhaps to take away from the bad look of some of their company's activities and make it look good by giving a lot of money to charity. Frankly, I do not care where the money comes from or for what reason, as long as it continues to come in large volumes.

There is a perception, cultivated by Her Majesty's Government's spokesmen, particularly those in the Treasury, that a lot of people dodge tax and give money to false charities or charities that are in their personal interest. If that is the case and the reason for closing the loophole, the loophole should be closed. As Mr Copeland said, a sledgehammer should not be taken to crack the nut. If the problem is that people are giving money to false charities, shut down those false charities, but do not attack all charities, including the good ones doing excellent work across our country.

A major problem with the policy is that the Government are trotting out as an excuse for it that people are exploiting a loophole by giving to false charities. It may be legitimate to want to close that loophole, but they should not remove people's ability to get tax relief on charitable donations. I appreciate that the Government have a laser-like focus on deficit reduction, at the expense of all other arguments that might be put forward. Given that they have to reduce the

debt that they inherited, that is fine. However, whether it is the pasty tax, the granny tax or now shutting down charitable donations, they just do not seem to care what they target to achieve that objective. We hear stories that these ideas have been sitting in the Treasury for, in some cases, decades and are being brought out to the current Chancellor, who slavishly adopts them because they suit his purpose of trying to reducing the deficit at breakneck speed.

Closing a loophole in the tax system is no bad thing. I do not think that anybody here wants people to be exploiting tax loopholes for their own ends. There is no argument for that. An annual cat-and-mouse game takes place: highly paid lawyers and accountants versus HMRC. Every year, that is corrected by a Finance Bill, only for those highly paid lawyers and accountants to find another loophole to exploit. The process goes on and on. By all means, the Government should close all those loopholes, but the message from everyone in the House is that tax relief on charitable giving is altogether different. Although the Government's aim might be to target the small percentage who give to so-called false charities, the result will be that millions suffer. The message going out loud and clear from the Assembly to Her Majesty's Treasury and Government is that we appreciate the work that charities do. Everybody here is grateful for what they do across Northern Ireland each and every day. We do not want that good work, which helps and supports what we in government are trying to do, to be curtailed by the closing of a tax loophole.

I am pleased to have been able to make the winding-up speech and grateful for the support from all parties in the Chamber who contributed. I thank everybody for their contribution and hope, as other Members said, that the Treasury will hear our voice added to the thousands on thousands of others asking it to think again, because its proposal will be hugely detrimental to the charities doing such good work across the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the proposals by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to limit tax relief on large charitable donations; believes that this could have a devastating impact on charities; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to abandon this approach.

Private Members' Business

Tourism: "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming"

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 in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to support and encourage Tourism Ireland's plans for "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming" in 2013, which will promote Ireland as a tourism destination to 70 million people worldwide; and further calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure that the benefit from these plans is derived on an all-island basis and that the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 celebrations are included as an integral attraction.

I am very pleased to move the motion on behalf of the SDLP. For a relatively small country, Ireland — North and South — has contributed much to the world through literature, poetry, music and sport. Over 70 million people worldwide claim Irish heritage, which is why "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming" should be embraced here in the North. We should celebrate our achievements and showcase everything that we have to be proud of, be that our beautiful natural heritage found at the Giant's Causeway, our vibrant cities of Belfast and Derry, which are in contrast to our peaceful and green townlands across the North, the shore land around Lough Neagh, and, of course, the recent commemorations and successful showcasing of the Titanic story. We have invested so much in developing the Titanic as a tourist attraction and a symbol of manufacturing to be proud of, so why not promote it to a stage of over 70 million people?

In 2011, an estimated £368 million was spent in the North by overseas visitors, with 1.5 million of them choosing to stay overnight, which, of course, has a positive impact on the hospitality industry. With 2012 proving to be a successful year so far, with the Titanic project, the return of MTV to Belfast, the forthcoming Irish Open in Portrush and the opening of the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre, we, as public representatives

with the interests of all our constituents at the core of our duties, should do all we can to ensure that the tourism wave that the North is now riding on continues to grow and develop.

"The Gathering" and all that it entails can lead to future events, investment and tourism inflow. It is a project not to be dismissed, as some people have done, but one to recognise and seize upon. The City of Culture 2013 will be a massive boost to our economy. It and the World Police and Fire Games can be even more successful than originally anticipated if taken as part of the homecoming celebrations on an all-island basis. We can combine our efforts to endorse the North as a viable tourist haven with the determination of the South to ensure that the homecoming is successful. The Irish Government are working hard to stimulate interest in the venture, with websites such as worldirish.com attracting thousands of visitors from around the world to share stories of their homeland, which may result in them travelling home for the planned events.

Millions of people worldwide consider themselves to be Irish and have connections to not just the South but the North. Our diversity and differing traditions can be drawn together on the understanding that we are all connected by the island on which we live. Let me be clear: the homecoming does not have a nationalist agenda, which may be the understanding of some Members. Rather, the events that will be promoted include Galway's International Oyster and Seafood Festival and the Street Performance World Championship in Cork, alongside the promotion of Irish literature, music and sports.

Last week, the Irish President, Michael D Higgins, in an address to Magee College in Derry, said that North/South co-operation needs to be broadened and deepened to improve the quality of life for all on this island. He also said that, in times of austerity, North/South co-operation made sense in terms of economies of scale. The venture is important not only for those who wish to reclaim their Irish roots; it is imperative that we seize the chance to increase our employment opportunities for local residents. At September 2011, tourism and leisure jobs accounted for 8% of all employee jobs in the North. There is a very real possibility that we can increase that figure through not only the projects that are planned for 2012 but the many ventures that can be endorsed in 2013.

Unemployment stands at 7·2%, with 61,500 people claiming unemployment benefit. In February this year, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, stated that her Department would make every effort to generate new employment opportunities. Therefore, it is astonishing that the Minister will not grasp this chance to promote this island, the North and local employment by actively encouraging and initiating discussions with the Minister in the South.

Her comments fly in the face of the recently stated intentions of her party leader, who said that it is no longer "them and us" and talked about shared heritage and history and how the commemorations that will be celebrated over the next decade will allow different traditions to be respected and different narratives to be heard among the clamour of voices from the past.

It is a sad part of our history that many people had to leave our country to seek employment.

1.30 pm

Mr Humphrey: Thanks very much to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that her utterances in the past few minutes do not suggest a united and uniform approach to the issue?

Mrs D Kelly: I do not think that you have been listening to what I have had to say. I really do not understand what you are saying. It is your party that seems to be divided on your true intentions and on whether you actually want to have a shared history and build a shared future, reconcile people and listen to the aspirations of others.

It is a sad part of the history of Ireland that many people had to leave the country to seek employment abroad. No event contributed more to the dispersal of our people than the famine. As a result, this celebratory event will encourage the many people abroad who are aware that they have Irish heritage to visit their ancestral homeland and learn more of their history. There are also people who left our country as recently as 20 or 30 years ago as a result of the Troubles. This is a prime chance to display to the world the work that has been done here to achieve and sustain peace. I am sure that those who left during the Troubles would seize the chance to visit a peacetime Ireland.

I will finish with quotations from some people who are regarded as ambassadors. The actor Liam Neeson stated:

"Being Irish and a citizen of the world, has made me truly appreciate Irish culture, music and history. Whether you're first, second generation Irish or even with no connection to Ireland, you should visit in 2013 for a unique experience."

The event has also been endorsed by the actor Stephen Rea, who stated:

"Ireland has contributed enormously to the world through its literature, drama, poetry and music. Our country has enriched lots of people's lives. The Gathering 2013 is a chance to give back. And celebrate the achievements of our small island on a worldwide stage."

People will recognise those names worldwide and be happy with their endorsements of the event known as "the Homecoming."

It is, after all, a tourism initiative. That is all that it is — a tourism initiative. We ask the DUP to reconsider its position and to listen carefully and without prejudice to the rationale, aims and objectives of "the Homecoming". We ask it to seize the event as an opportunity to demonstrate its credentials in moving beyond "them and us" and to make decisions that are in the best interests of all the people whom we serve and represent so that we build a better future that says to the world that we will put the interests of our people first, seize employment opportunities and create a better future for this generation and generations to come.

Mr Moutray: All of us in the House will agree that we cannot overestimate the importance to our economy of developing and growing our tourist industry. When I say "our economy" and "our tourist industry", I am referring to Northern Ireland's.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Moutray: The motion is certainly tourist-orientated. However, it is a very green motion, and I am not surprised, given who tabled it. This is a case of the SDLP using tourism as an excuse to peddle its all-island agenda.

To my mind, next year's "An Irish Homecoming" will be hugely sentimental and very Irish in a way that I cannot and will not really identify with. It is a sort of "Mother Ireland" concept that conjures up images of leprechauns, shillelaghs, pints of Guinness, donkeys, dancing at the crossroads and thatched cottages. In other the words, it is the sort of stuff that we see far too much of in retail outlets at our airports. A quick glance

at the list of venues and events related to "the Homecoming" reveals that almost all of them are in the Republic of Ireland. The initiative is being driven by the Irish Government, and it is being geared primarily towards boosting tourism figures in the Irish Republic in an effort to strengthen the ailing economy. Indeed, that is the overwhelming impression that you get from the promotional literature and from statements by the Irish Tourism Minister and others.

I have no problem with the Irish Government developing their tourist base, and I wish them well for their homecoming initiative. Indeed, some tourists might cross the border into Northern Ireland, and we may benefit from that. There are times when it is right and proper that our tourism Minister will want to co-operate with her Irish counterpart, and if such co-operation will be to the benefit of the Northern Ireland economy or the broader UK economy, that is fine.

I am not the biggest fan of Tourism Ireland but I accept that it does some good work. I pay tribute to the role that its chief executive, Niall Gibbons, is playing in promoting Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to 12 July. However, Tourism Ireland's goal is the promotion of the island of Ireland, and the logical outcome of that is that its main focus will be on the Republic. We must concentrate on marketing our own distinct Northern Ireland image. That has to be our priority. We have plenty of work to do and plenty of opportunities to seize.

During the long hard years of the Troubles, we fell so far behind for obvious reasons. We have so much ground to make up, but I am glad to say that we are making up that ground. This is indeed our time, our place. Tourism estimates for 2011 were published a couple of weeks ago, and they are very encouraging. Last year saw a 20% increase in the amount of money spent by overseas visitors. One and a half million overseas visitors spent at least one night in Northern Ireland, which was up 4% on 2010.

That is all very encouraging. It is only the end of April and there is already a real buzz about the Province. The Titanic visitor centre, Titanic Belfast, has attracted worldwide interest in this centenary year, and I have every confidence that it will not only prove the naysayers wrong, but it will exceed all expectations. It has been described by the travel publication 'Fodor's Ireland' as being the world's biggest tourism story in 2012. In a couple of months, the

brand new visitor centre will open at the Giant's Causeway, and we will have the Irish Open golf tournament at Royal Portrush for the first time since 1947. Plans are also well advanced for the celebration of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, and, like many others, I look forward to the Orange demonstration that will be held here at the end of September. Next year, Londonderry will be the United Kingdom City of Culture, and, indeed, the motion refers to that important year in the life of our second city.

Mr S Anderson: The Member may have referred to it already, but does he agree that what we have before us today is nothing but a one-sided green agenda and motion? Mrs Kelly said in recent comments in the local press that she was totally against the obelisk being erected in Portadown to commemorate the signing of the Ulster covenant in Portadown, and she is querying why planners gave planning permission for it. Does the Member agree that that proves that Mrs Kelly and the motion are both coming forward with a one-sided agenda?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Moutray: I agree entirely with my colleague, but it is nothing new for Mrs Kelly to attack something that is legitimately done when she has not expressed any concerns about an IRA monument in Craigavon, which has never had planning permission.

Returning to the topic, 2013 will be a challenging and exciting time for the city, and I encourage my colleague Arlene Foster and her officials to work closely with the Culture Minister and her officials to maximise the potential not only for Londonderry but for the Province as a whole. All the key players from Londonderry need to be involved. It is vital that all traditions that form the history and fabric of the maiden city are included in the various events being planned for next year. The plans must be broadly based and inclusive if 2013 is to be a success.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I oppose the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate, but, at the outset, I must say that I am a wee bit disappointed at the tone that has been taken and the way in which it has been handled by

Members from both sides of the House. However, it should be no surprise to anybody in the House that such a thing would happen.

Throughout the past four months, we have heard quite a lot about the NI 2012 campaign. It is planned that some £7 million will be spent promoting it, and it is only right and proper that adequate funding is spent on promoting our growing tourism industry. We are in the midst of a global recession, but visitor numbers across the world are increasing. The number of people looking to come into Europe from places such as China and India is growing all the time, and it is important that the Executive are to the fore in trying to attract visitors to this part of Ireland.

It is also important that all options that are open to increase our visitor numbers and our tourism revenue are explored. The DUP has claimed that this is a green motion to try to expedite some sort of united Ireland. It is nothing of the sort, and I think that to say that it is so is a bit of a red herring. It is not a green motion, and "The Gathering" is not a green initiative. It is not a scheme that has been devised by the Dublin Government.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that if nationalists on Derry City Council had taken the same attitude as Members across the Floor in the DUP, Derry would not be in the position to celebrate the UK City of Culture next year and that the people would be denied all the opportunities that will flow from that?

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

Mr Flanagan: I am at a loss as to what the Member is getting at, so I will not bother responding.

"The Gathering" is an initiative that was started by the Scottish Government in 2009 to try to encourage visitors with their roots in Scotland to come back to Scotland. What is being run by the Dublin Government is basically a carbon copy of that. Across the world, people see their roots as being in Ireland, and they see their ancestors as being Irish. Most of those people left this island before partition. So the heritage of being Irish that they speak about reflects everybody, regardless of whether you perceive yourself to be a unionist or a nationalist.

I come from and represent a border constituency.

Mr Allister: If what the Member says is correct, will he point to one item on the official website that makes mention of the Ulster-Scots heritage or anything that is not as vividly described by Mr Moutray?

Mr Flanagan: To be honest to Mr Allister, I have not scrolled through the entire website to see the various events that are taking place. If the Member has an opportunity or an event that he wishes to bring forward, as others have done, he should bring it to Fáilte Ireland, which is running the event, and I am sure that it will happily facilitate it on the website.

I come from a border constituency and can clearly see how such an initiative, if worked out properly, would benefit the entire local community and economy. In my area, Belleek Pottery welcomes up to 200,000 visitors each year. Most of those visitors come from tour operators that are based in the South, and the people fly into Dublin Airport. Their only trip into the North is the 70 yds they take across the border to come into Fermanagh. Greater collaboration with tourism activities in the South, therefore, would provide an economic benefit to our citizens and to the businesses that we represent. We need to ensure that much more is done to attract the visitors who come to this island to come North to experience our unique product offering.

Members highlighted the different cultural aspects here that may not be so prominent in the South. It is important that those are marketed to people across the world who might be interested in seeing them.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Is the Member aware of what work Fáilte Ireland has been doing to encourage the people who fly into Dublin to come to Northern Ireland? My understanding is that it remains the case that only one in eight people who fly into the Republic travel to Northern Ireland. What is Fáilte Ireland doing to rectify that?

Mr Flanagan: Unfortunately, I cannot speak for Fáilte Ireland, and I am not au fait with what happens in Dublin Airport, but I can give the Member an example of what happens at the airport at Knock. The airport managing authorities there are working hard to try to promote the north-west of this island as a tourism destination for visitors. The Member will be aware that Tourism Ireland is responsible for marketing the North of Ireland and the island of

Ireland abroad. It is doing a good job promoting this island to visitors, and we have seen increases in visitor numbers in recent years, which is very welcome. We are still not back to where we were in 2007 when things were at their peak, but we are going in the right direction. It is important that we continue that trend.

1.45 pm

Many people come to this island to experience a wide range of activities. A recent conference in Belfast heard that promoting the North separate to the rest of the island was confusing for potential visitors, and there is some merit in that. However, the danger of promoting the North completely separately from the rest of the island does not only lie in the potential confusion of visitors. When somebody is looking at a website at home for places to visit, particularly those from places like Australia or America where there is quite a length journey, they will mostly come here for 10 days or a fortnight. Many will find it difficult to find enough activities or events to go to to justify staying here for a week or a fortnight. Therefore, there needs to be more work done there, and I urge the Minister to continue on that path.

Mrs Overend: Tourism is fundamentally important to our economy, and it is vital that we make the best use of Northern Ireland's potential in that area. We have debated in the House the importance of the decade of centenaries, such as the covenant and the Easter rising, as well as speaking on the Titanic, which is something that we are all rightly proud of. My party has also tabled Matters of the Day on our golfing success and the Oscar that was won by the Northern Irish film, 'The Shore'. We should all be keenly aware of the value of tourism, combined with the Irish Open, other signature projects and the World Police and Fire Games, in promoting economic growth and in working towards the goal of a shared future for Northern Ireland over this Assembly's mandate and, indeed, further. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) figures from earlier this month show that improvements are evident in our tourism industry, with money spent by overseas tourists increasing 20% on last year. We must work to sustain and build on that result, moving forward in order to reach and even exceed our Programme for Government targets, which were so badly missed in the 2007-2011 period.

Today's motion tabled by the SDLP calls on the Executive:

"to support and encourage Tourism Ireland's plans for 'The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming' in 2013".

I have looked closely at "the Irish Homecoming" and, undoubtedly, it will play a key role in attempts to restore the troubled Irish economy, and we all wish them well as they seek to do so. It is estimated that in the similar celebration that was held in Scotland throughout 2009, £53.7 million of additional tourism revenue was generated: 95,000 visitors were influenced to travel to Scotland as a result, and £154 million of positive global media was generated by the PR campaign.

It is clear that the potential for the Republic of Ireland is huge. However, one simply has to look at the schedule of events planned to realise that "the Homecoming" is an initiative from the Irish Government for the benefit of the Republic of Ireland. The SDLP's motion attempts to bring the UK City of Culture into the equation. However, I felt that Mrs Kelly's contribution did not focus primarily on that part of the motion. The reality is that Londonderry is not part of "the Irish Homecoming" of 2013. Some Members in the House fail to recognise that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are in competition: we are in competition for foreign direct investment; we compete to attract jobs; and our tourism industries are competitors.

Rather than debate linking our tourism plan to an Irish Government initiative that lasts for one year, would it not be much more relevant to discuss the fact that Northern Ireland does not have a strategy that is dedicated solely to the fundamentally important sector of tourism? A draft strategy was produced in 2010. It was an industry-led document, drawn up by the industry and given to Arlene Foster to bring to the Executive. The Minister indicated recently that the draft strategy has been delayed, given that we are now in changed economic times. However, we are two years on from the publication of the draft, and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee has yet to see a finalised document.

Tourism is a key driver of the economy, and the economy is the number-one priority of the Executive. It follows, therefore, that an ambitious strategy in that area should be a prerequisite as we seek to rebalance and rebuild the Northern Ireland economy. The missed opportunity is

made worse by the fact that Northern Ireland's tourism sector has so much potential, as I outlined earlier. Of course we need to capitalise on the increased number of tourists visiting the Republic of Ireland in 2013, and I believe that we are well placed to do so, given the many high-profile attractions that we have. Despite what a Sinn Féin colleague said, I believe that Northern Ireland could certainly welcome people for a week or a fortnight, and they would have plenty of things to do.

The Ulster Unionist Party has confidence in our tourism potential. As I am sure the Minister will outline, we will continue to work with the Irish Government in matters of mutual interest. However, in conclusion, I say that what is more important than encouraging Tourism Ireland's plans for the Republic of Ireland is to encourage its plans for Northern Ireland, and for the Minister to bring forward the tourism strategy that is sadly lacking.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion. I see this as a real opportunity to join in a unique tourist initiative. I hope that the Minister, even at this late stage, and the Tourist Board will recognise the potential of "The Gathering" and capitalise on it.

The Republic of Ireland Government are, I believe, putting a total of about €16 million into this venture. It is a very serious and well planned initiative to attract anything up to 300,000 visitors and emigrants back to Ireland during the year 2013. It is targeted at 12 specific events. However, there are actually 42 events in total on the complete list. We have specific events here that could and should be linked in. People have referenced Londonderry/Derry as the City of Culture, but there are pipe band championships, the Highland Games and the whole Ulster-Scots connection. If the Ulster-Scots agencies are not looking at this in a favourable way, I wonder what they are about. If you want to promote Ulster-Scots culture and heritage —

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the DUP and the UUP have displayed an astounding myopia around this festival and that it is indeed an excellent vehicle for the promotion of tourism here and one that we should piggyback onto to ensure that tourist numbers are increased beyond that envisaged already?

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

Mr Lunn: I will not get into insulting the DUP and the Ulster Unionists just yet. However, I agree with what the Member said.

Mr Allister mentioned the Ulster-Scots connection and the lack of reference to it on the Fáilte Ireland website. Why should it mention it? It is up to the Ulster-Scots connection to promote themselves. If that means co-operating with authorities in the South, on an all-Ireland basis, why should they not —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I have given way enough.

There are 70 million people worldwide who either claim Irish ancestry or are first- or second-generation emigrants from these shores. That includes a huge number who come from Northern Ireland. There is no reason why we should distance ourselves from this. I think it was Mr Humphrey, or maybe his colleague next to him, Mr Anderson, who suggested that our Tourist Board is some kind of stand-alone operation. It just cannot be —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No.

It really cannot be that way. This island is too small. This event should be promoted jointly; of course it should.

Look at the Northern Ireland connections in the USA and Australia for evidence. Look at the musical connections — the Appalachian and bluegrass connections — that people from Lisburn are so keen to develop. Look at Alister McReynolds, and so on, and the various initiatives in Atlanta. That is to be applauded. Why not try to develop that through this initiative in the Republic?

The Minister, in her comments so far in answers to questions, has not really demonstrated a level of enthusiasm commensurate with a major tourism opportunity. On 23 November, she confirmed that there are no plans to mark "The Gathering". On 9 January, she said:

"We will capitalise on all the tourism initiatives running in 2013 to maximize visitor numbers".

On 31 January, she said:

"Any increase in tourism numbers to the island is to be welcomed and Northern Ireland is well placed

to benefit as the initiative fits well with our plans for 2013 when Londonderry is the UK City of Culture".

That is fair enough, but it is hardly an enthusiastic or ringing endorsement, nor is it any commitment to co-operate or work with the Irish Government on this initiative. I encourage those who deal with these matters to invest in the project or to co-operate with Tourism Ireland or Fáilte Ireland to make sure that the benefits to the North are maximised. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say today. Hopefully, she will be a bit more progressive than her party's Members have been so far.

How can we claim to be serious about tourism and our heritage if we pass on an opportunity to become engaged in an all-Ireland project of this magnitude? I notice the experience of "the Homecoming Scotland 2009". It is fair to say that conclusions about the economic benefit were mixed, but there is no doubt about the number of people involved: 95,000 people came to Scotland, in some measure, because of the publicity around "the Homecoming". That is very revealing. I firmly believe that the Irish event will exceed that figure by several multiples. The figure of 300,000 is suggested, but there could be a lot more than that because the Irish diaspora — as we call it — is far more pronounced around the world than the Scottish one. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about that. I particularly look forward to nailing down the Ulster Unionist Party's view. My party will be supporting the motion; it is an opportunity too good to miss.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Although there will be benefits for Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland's latest tourism initiative, it is important that we keep focused on promoting Northern Ireland as a premier tourist attraction across the world.

This year to date has been very exciting for Northern Ireland, not least with the 2012: Our time, Our place campaign. I commend the Enterprise Minister Arlene Foster for leading on this very positive and, to date, successful project. We look forward to many more events that are planned across the country this year and beyond. Also, 2013 will be a very special year, particularly with Londonderry celebrating its year as the UK City of Culture. It is important that we maximise the benefit locally for Northern Ireland throughout those key events and celebrations. I understand that the Apprentice

Boys will be walking on 10 August in 2013, during the Fleadh Cheoil. My pronunciation of those words may not be correct: it is not my strongest point. There could be a clash of cultures, but we hope that we will all be singing from the same hymn sheet, or perhaps walking to the same tune.

The launch of the Titanic signature project, the recent Circuit of Ireland Rally with its worldwide television coverage and the up-and-coming Irish Open golf championship are just some examples of events and projects that have and will showcase Northern Ireland across the world. All those positive developments have helped to bring a great boost to the local economy. I certainly welcome recent confirmation of a 4% increase in overseas visitor spend in Northern Ireland in 2011. I look forward to seeing that figure grow in the near future. For too long, we did not sell Northern Ireland to the world; now we are beginning to change that, and this is something in which we can all share.

We need to ensure that we continue actively to promote and encourage greater tourism and economic activity, and I welcome the creation of the Northern Ireland Air Access initiative, which is a practical measure designed to improve and promote access to Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. Great potential exists, and I look forward to further developments.

I also commend the delegation led by the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the Middle East and India recently. I hope that we will see progress in getting a direct flight link established with the Middle East. That could be a key opening for significant links to be established with that important world market, and all those measures and developments prove that Northern Ireland is open for business.

Any initiative by the Republic of Ireland that will bring visitors directly or indirectly to Northern Ireland is to be welcomed. We need to continue to build on the excellent work of the Executive, DETI, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. I am slightly concerned that this motion has more to do with politics than with the promotion of Northern Ireland or the Republic. That is why I oppose it.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it for bringing it to the House. The tourism outlook

is good, as many stakeholders have already outlined, and it could be better. Last year, the North had a growth figure of 4%; the rest of Ireland had a figure of 7%. The rest of the island is ahead of us in tourism, so we need to take advantage of the more developed tourism product on the rest of the island.

I think that that is a common sense approach and that it makes economic sense. "The Gathering" is a good tourism initiative and is quite similar to the event that was held in Scotland, which attracted 95,000 people, as Trevor Lunn, a Member from the Alliance Party, pointed out.

2.00 pm

The previous Member to speak said that any initiative that takes tourists to the North is to be welcomed. That is exactly what this initiative will do. Regardless of their politics, and given the present economic situation, I think that we have to look at things more and more through an economic prism as opposed to with political blinkers on. Unfortunately, that has been the approach from the other side of the House so far. So, we need to exploit this event for economic benefits.

There seems to be some focus on Derry in the motion and no mention of the north coast, so I take exception to that. On the north coast, of course, you have Bushmills, the Giant's Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede, Ballycastle, Rathlin and the glens. I will support the motion today, but I warn the Members that they should maybe include a reference to north Antrim the next time. *[Laughter.]*

With regard to a lack of a joined-up approach, the events that are outlined for "The Gathering" say to me that the Department has not engaged effectively enough with Departments in the rest of the island to try to ensure that we are included. Events in north Antrim, Derry, Craigavon and Belfast should be included, because thousands upon thousands of people will be going through the brochures. They will read the information and will see no mention of the events that are taking place in those places and others such as Belfast. That is an opportunity missed, it makes no economic sense to me, and it will reduce the number of tourists coming North, which is to be regretted.

Obviously, tourism is one of the green shoots of the economy, and the economic

possibilities that will arise from it should not be underestimated. Ulster-Scots and Scots-Irish heritage was mentioned. The diaspora that exists in Australia, the US and across Europe includes those of Ulster-Scots and Scots-Irish heritage. Being part of this initiative will bring those people back to this country, so I do not understand why that is not being thrown into the mix, because it is quite obvious that they will be attracted back through this initiative.

Phil Flanagan, a Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, referred to a recent conference. Some media outlets picked up that the marketing can be confusing, because a number of people from places such as the United States who want to come to Ireland go through Dublin. Comments were made about Dublin Airport, and so forth, and I think that we, the Minister and the Department need to think more on an all-island basis, especially as the market comes to this island mainly through that airport.

There are also difficulties with the NIO's approach in that we cannot put in place a tourist waiver scheme to ensure that the same tourists from Asia who are going from North to South can go from South to North. A lot of issues arise from a lack of an all-island approach, which has resulted in fewer tourists coming to the North and is doing us economic damage.

We have a huge tourism market throughout this island, particularly in the rest of the island. Not to take advantage of that is absolutely barmy. Trevor Lunn referred to the Minister saying that there were no plans to mark "The Gathering". I think that that is an opportunity missed. Tourists will be lost, which will harm economic growth. Anybody, particularly the public, can see that as well. I urge the Minister not to follow in the footsteps of her political colleagues who have spoken so far, to take the political blinkers off and to not miss this opportunity.

Mr Frew: Again, I find myself debating a motion that, having read it, I do not think really deserves to be in this Assembly. To me, it is a nothing motion. Of course, how could I ever support a motion on tourism that does not even mention the Giant's Causeway or north Antrim, as my colleague across the way said? It really is a shame of a motion on tourism, and I tut-tut when I see something on tourism that does not reflect the true meaning of Northern Ireland, the Giant's Causeway and north Antrim. That is a plug for my constituency.

I want to stay in this mindset, because there is so much self-defeatism from the Benches before me. Mr Flanagan represents Fermanagh and South Tyrone; a beautiful section of our Province, and somewhere you could certainly spend 10 days without any problem. Here he is, representing that area, and struggling to stay in Northern Ireland for 10 days. I find that a shame.

Other Members across the way say that we have to be involved with the Republic and stay under its wing; that this is how we will enhance things and make them better. Let me tell you this, folks: you are not representing your people very well when you talk in that way. You have your own constituencies, and you should be bringing them up and advertising them for what they are — jewels in the crown of Northern Ireland and this Province.

Let us not have any more self-defeatism; let us promote Northern Ireland for what it is. Let us promote Fermanagh as the holiday destination that it is — a place where you could spend 10 days without any problem whatsoever.

Mr Swann: Rather than promoting Fermanagh as a holiday destination, stick to promoting North Antrim.

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

Mr Frew: I thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, for that extra minute. I might just spend all of it speaking of North Antrim, if the Member wishes. He knows all too well how much we promote North Antrim, how much we work and how much the DUP has worked of late to encourage business and to get a successful planning application for a golf course on the north coast. He will know that only too well.

The motion is flawed. It mentions Tourism Ireland's plans for "The Gathering", when it is Fáilte Ireland that is promoting, working at and managing this at the behest of the Republic's Government. It is fine for Fáilte Ireland to do that, but remember that this initiative was born to assist business and the economy of the Republic of Ireland.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that perhaps we could do with a bit of assistance for business and tourism up here?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, but I do not see how a factory opening up in Cork or Limerick will help South

Belfast one bit. That is why we have to make sure that we glean as much benefit from this as possible without getting involved. Why would we get involved, spend money and promote this when we are going to benefit from it anyway? It is clear and it is a given that there is a certain amount of cross-border footfall from the Republic. We accept that and will gladly take it, but we should not get involved in a scheme that will initially help business and tourism in the Republic, that will have no direct benefit to us and that will make us lose our focus on the events that we will be hosting in 2013. That is —

Mr Flanagan: Does the Member agree that there would be merit in the Minister or NITB approaching Fáilte Ireland to see whether it could include on its website a list of events or activities that are on in the North? It may not actually cost the Tourist Board or the Department any money. I think that approach should be made.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention, but, again, that is not what this motion is about. It is self-defeating to think that our Ministers, including this Minister, are not engaged across the table with Ministers in the Republic on issues such as this and on issues that purely promote Northern Ireland. When we send Ministers down to the Republic, we expect them to represent their people — Northern Irish people — to try to make sure that we promote Northern Ireland and get the best benefit for Northern Ireland in any situation. Why would we want to promote Galway, Limerick, Dublin and everywhere else, in either business or tourism, if we do not get a direct input into it?

My time is nearly up, and I have not got through even half of what I wanted to say or half of what I wanted to say about North Antrim. However, you can be assured that we in Northern Ireland will retain the focus on what will be Londonderry UK City of Culture, a year-long celebration for Northern Ireland. We also have the World Police and Fire Games, which will be vital to the world of sport and tourism in this Province.

I have no problem with our gaining benefit from either the Republic's footfall or its tourism strategies. However, let us not plough into the middle of this and lose focus from what should be Northern Ireland's tourism industry.

Mr Swann: I warn the House that I feel another advertisement for north Antrim coming on. I cannot start my contribution without following

on from what the Alliance Party Members said. They were very keen to see where we were standing. It is obvious from Trevor's intervention: we should be piggybacking — I think that I am quoting there — on what the Republic of Ireland is doing. If all that this place has achieved in the promotion of tourism for Northern Ireland is the ability to piggyback on the Government of the Republic of Ireland, it has sadly failed in yet another escapade. Co-operate maybe, but "piggyback" was the word that you used.

We have to learn to stand alone. That is what this place is about: the promotion of Northern Ireland and its tourism. I have to come back to this point, which I know has already been mentioned. Mr Phil Flanagan said that he could not spend 10 or 14 days in Northern Ireland. Given that you are a public representative for Fermanagh, which is a fantastic area for tourism, I think that you, sir, should get back and look at your own tourism brochures. Your colleague is from up there in north Antrim, so if you want to come up to our end of the country, we will show you how to participate in tourism for a fortnight.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): So, where are you going to show him?

Mr Swann: Kells, as usual, and probably my constituency office.

Mr Flanagan: The Member told me to go and look at the tourism brochures for Fermanagh. However, if he does the same, he will see that the only event is a show in County Tyrone.

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

Mr Swann: I am sure that the Minister will correct you. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Swann: I am sure that the Minister, who represents the same constituency, will correct you. Again, there is a failing there if that is all that we can do.

Given the amount of funding given to and the emphasis placed on tourism by the Irish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive must be at the top of their game when promoting our tourism in our own country. I use the word "our" quite happily: this is our country and our

tourism. When we talked about the decade of centenaries, I know that Members in this place tried to remove the word "our" and replace it with the word "the". They wanted us to talk about "the history", "the culture" and "the tourism of this country". That is wrong. We are all here to represent our own constituencies and our areas, which have fantastic tourism potential.

We look forward to the decade of centenaries, which has already started. We have already celebrated the 100th anniversary of the launch of the Titanic, which generated positive media and increased visitor numbers to Northern Ireland. We will soon have the Irish Open and the World Police and Fire Games. We also have signature projects such as the Causeway Coast and the glens. The new Causeway visitors' centre, which I visited recently along with our MEP, Jim Nicholson, is opening soon and will be a fantastic tourist attraction for the whole of north Antrim. We have asked for something to be done in Bushmills and the surrounding area. The SDLP has put forward a motion calling for funding to promote "The Gathering" on an all-Ireland basis. However, perhaps it could look at getting a wee bit of funding to regenerate Bushmills town, given the number of people who will be travelling from the visitors' centre to the Causeway distillery. I have already asked the Minister about whether he would be willing to look at that.

Mr McKay: The Member outlined some of the great tourist attractions that we have in north Antrim. However, there is no point in having such great tourist attractions if people are not going to come and see them. One of the issues that people along the north coast, such as B&B owners, etc, have raised with me is that tourists are coming to the likes of the Giant's Causeway and Ballycastle, etc, for only one day. The fact is that, when you go on to Google and search for websites about Ireland, references to the Giant's Causeway, and so forth, do not come up, and that is where we are losing out on tourists. We need to market this on an all-island basis, because that is what tourists are looking for.

Mr Swann: You will agree with me that we need to market tourism principally in our areas in Northern Ireland.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not a failing of Tourism Ireland, which is there to promote all-island tourism in Northern Ireland and the Republic, if it cannot promote

the Causeway and north Antrim in the way that it should?

Mr Swann: I agree fully. I could honestly talk about north Antrim all day, but I want to get back to the motion. An awful lot of the Members who spoke veered away from the motion, and I think that we should get back to it. The most significant element of the motion for us in the Ulster Unionist Party is the reference to the UK City of Culture celebrations, which should be promoted as a Northern Ireland tourist event.

The Executive have already put an extra £12.36 million into the UK City of Culture of Londonderry, which should include enough marketing material to promote that city. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can back me up on that figure when she speaks later.

2.15 pm

Mr Frew said that it is a year-long celebration. The UK City of Culture has one of the most fantastic tourism legacies of events that are promoted as UK events. Liverpool is still maximising its status as UK City of Culture, which took place as far back as 2008. There is potential there if we invest the money correctly in Northern Irish tourism potential. There is a lot more to get out of that.

One thing that we are missing out on is the Scots-Irish connection, which has fantastic tourism potential if we look towards America. We should develop something specific. A Northern Ireland Tourist Board paper titled 'Genealogy and Roots Tourism' is available. Our tourism Minister should look at developing the link and promoting Northern Ireland so that people can come from America and Canada to look for their roots and genealogy in Northern Ireland and not have to concentrate on somewhere in another jurisdiction.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming" is set to be a unique tourist event in the Irish calendar in 2013. It is all about attracting here anyone who has a connection with Ireland, be it through family, sport, music or just a love of the country. It will be similar to the homecoming in Scotland in 2009. What makes this event unique is that it will involve the entire country, from the top in business, music, sport, media, advertising, and so on, right down to the festivals and events in towns and villages across the Twenty-six Counties.

Some of the events are already household names. Some Members have said that the calendar of events has been deliberately put out to play to an all-Ireland agenda. Let me remind them of just some of the 50-odd flagship events, some of which have been around for years, perhaps for longer than some Members have been alive. They include the Rose of Tralee, the All-Ireland hurling and Gaelic football finals, Kinsale Arts Week and the Galway Races. The organisers are saying that, no matter what your interest, it can and will be catered for some time, some place in the year's calendar of events.

A project board has been set up already, and it has come up with a unique and cost-effective way of promoting the events to a worldwide audience through a voluntary council of champions. It is made up of individuals who are recognised worldwide and have the contacts and networks to get support and help with fundraising. All of that is totally voluntary.

Ireland in 2013 will be the place to be. We already have the Titanic project, and we are going to open the Causeway centre this year. New events will include the City of Culture in Derry, the All-Ireland Fleadh, the Irish Open, the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race and the World Police and Fire Games. That is a great calendar of events to look forward to. It could generate up to £140 million for the economy and provide much-needed income and business for the hospitality sector across the whole island.

In Southern Ireland, the tourist and hospitality sector is a €5 billion industry that employs in the region of 180,000 people. It is now down to the two Governments to show leadership and show the world that the island of Ireland is open for business. Here, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment welcomed the new £2 million Northern Ireland air access initiative, which will offer competitive fares and ease of access. Another welcome part of the scheme is the inclusion of the ferry companies, which will increase visitor numbers. The Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport has confirmed that the special 9% VAT rate for tourism and leisure activities will continue into next year. I believe that both Ministers have, in their own way, shown support for the incoming historic year.

It will not be the Ministers who will sell this tourist initiative; rather, it will be the quantity and quality of events and the visitor numbers that will make 2012 and 2013 a success.

The City of Culture has already been made an integral attraction. It is a global event, thanks to everyone involved in it.

If anyone looking to go on holidays were in here listening to some of the things that are being said, they would pack their bags and go home. As for some of the Members talking about the South of Ireland's programme for tourist events —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: No, I will not. I am still talking, so sit you down. *[Laughter.]*

Some Members said that the programme of events in the South of Ireland is just for its own agenda. Unless you have been in cloud cuckoo land or sitting up a tree for years, what do you expect that country to do? It is the same here; we are promoting our own tourism. However, as the Minister said, if The Homecoming is there, we must see where we can connect with it and see what we can get from the overspill from it.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way now?

Mr McMullan: I am nearly finished. I will give way.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that he could spend 10 days in Fermanagh?

Mr McMullan: I do not doubt that I would be very welcome, but, equally, I could spend 10 days in Ballymena, and that is something else. If you could spend 10 days in Ballymena, you could spend it anywhere. We have to stop being parochial and making it an issue of us and them. If there is an event in the South of Ireland that will overspill here, we will get the benefits and vice versa. We talk about the Irish Open golf tournament, but where has it been for years? This is the first time that it has been here. As far as putting this country up as a place for donkeys and leprechauns is concerned, do you realise how many millions of pounds tourism brings into this country? You are the silly one for even trying to turn that around.

Dr McDonnell: By this stage, I am nearly sorry that I set out to speak, because this is a very sad situation where people are turning a serious issue into a bit of codology; it has been turned into little better than a schoolyard squabble. This is what happens when you have people who do not know much about how tourism works or how it could work: tourism is about

persuading people from other places to spend time, and perhaps a bit of money, here and enjoy it at the same time; it is not about caging people somewhere of our choice for a week or 10 days or whatever we might decide. However, that seems to be the attitude of some. I despair when I hear some of the attitudes that have resonated around the Chamber. Generally, when we discuss tourism, I despair because, frankly, we do not have a clue. I humbly suggest that we are a liability when it comes to creating tourism in the North. Tourists have a choice about where they spend their money.

Chair, I find it difficult with the chattering in the background from a sedentary position. Is it possible to deal with it?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is not something new.

Dr McDonnell: No, but these schoolboys do not have a clue. Tourists have a — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has the Floor. Order.

Dr McDonnell: I am happy to give way if any of them has anything constructive to say. Does anyone have anything constructive to say, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Tourists have a choice of where they spend their money, where they go, how much they spend and what they spend it on; we should not view them, as has been happening in today's debate, as a flock of stupid sheep that can be herded wherever we want them to go. I am sure that Mr Frew in all his wisdom has not spent 10 days in Fermanagh; if he wants to go to Fermanagh for 10 days, I am happy to contribute to his costs. *[Laughter.]* Members should not make outrageous proposals in the Chamber. Fermanagh is a good place to visit; however, 60% of our real tourists — those not visiting friends and family — enter Northern Ireland, Ulster or whatever we want to call it, via Dublin airport. We have to remember that. If Members want rid of those 60%, that is fine, but I do not.

Somebody made the point that a business coming into Cork was not of any consequence to us here. Not so many days ago, I happened to listen to Mark Henderson who runs Mash Direct, and he said that the biggest market for his product, which is Comber potatoes and vegetables, is in Cork. People need to get to the stage where they realise that the world has

gone global and that tourists are global and have global choices. If people do not recognise that, economically, we are stuck with each other whether we like each other or not, and that prosperity in Cork can, in turn, bring prosperity here and vice versa, we are wasting our time.

There is no nationalist tourism or unionist tourism. Tourists who come here do not give a damn what our politics are. They have a wide range of choices and many markets throughout the world they could go to. Let us take Ulster tourism, if we want to call it that. There are Ulster Scots — or the Scots Irish as they prefer to call themselves — in Tennessee or wherever they are. Let us take that sector in the US and use “The Gathering” to mine it and follow it through, and let us mine the Ulster roots of many in Canada, because it is waiting there for somebody to do something about it. Let us look to Australia, where there is a vast market and substantial Ulster roots. Last but not least, let us look to the UK. Let us look to the whole swathe of young people there who either graduated from Queen’s or the University of Ulster or left school here to go to another university.

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

Dr McDonnell: There are vast opportunities to explore. Let us take a leaf out of the Scottish example.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Dr McDonnell: There are vast opportunities there, and I appeal to the Minister and the Executive to take up the very generous offers that have been made by the Irish Government.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I did not want to interrupt the Member in full flow, but he said that tourists “do not give a damn”. For future reference, could we have a ruling on whether or not that is parliamentary language?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will discuss it.

Question Time begins at 2.30 pm. I suggest that the House takes it ease until that time, when the debate will continue with the Minister’s response.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Strangford Lough: Fishing

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she is putting in place to restrict fishing in Strangford lough in order to avoid EU infraction fines.
(AQO 1807/11-15)

Mrs O’Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. That is a serious matter, which my Department shares with the Department of the Environment. Officials from both Departments have had very helpful recent discussions with the Commission and proposed a range of actions in Strangford into the future, which we are hopeful that the Commission will accept as a meaningful management strategy for the horse mussels. Those arrangements will include further fisheries restrictions, among a broader range of actions. I discussed the implications of those with fisheries stakeholders earlier today. We are engaged in a formal process with the Commission on that issue, and will require its formal acceptance of our proposals. It would be wrong at this stage to speculate about the detailed outcome of that process, but it is fair to say that we are working through all of the issues that have been identified.

By way of an update, as I said, earlier today I met the fishermen who fish Strangford lough. They had a very constructive approach around the issues that we need to address. It is very clear that we are going to be able to work together to create the restoration plan that the Commission is calling for. I think that fishermen can be part of that plan. Also, in moving forward we have to continue to engage with the Ulster Wildlife Trust.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response, and I am very pleased about her engagement with the fishing industry. I know that she probably cannot say very much about the

details, but will she indicate whether there is going to be an acceptance of a much wider exclusion zone for fishing?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Yes, what is being proposed at the moment and discussed with the Commission are the yellow zones according to the Queen's University report. That is what I discussed with the fishermen today. I think that is clearly the minimum that the Commission is prepared to accept. However, there are a few additional areas that fishermen feel could be explored as a further potential to not close that down, so we are going to go back to the Commission with that. It is about working together in partnership with the fishermen, the Department and the Ulster Wildlife Trust.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer thus far. Will she tell us how many vessels fish on Strangford lough, and what is the value of their catch?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Strangford lough is restricted to vessels of 40 feet or less, and can only be fished by pot fishing. There are seven small vessels that fish there for longer than seven months a year, and it supports over 20 on a part-time basis. In 2009, the lough provided landings of langoustine, velvet crab, brown crab and lobster, all valued at approximately £140,000.

Mr Rogers: Does the Minister plan to introduce further exclusion zones for fishing, and, if so, has she carried out an assessment on the economic impact that that will have on local fishermen and businesses? I am particularly concerned about the areas of Ardglass and Kilkeel in my constituency of South Down.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am also concerned about the livelihoods of fishermen, who depend heavily on being able to fish on the lough. The minimum exclusion zones that the Commission will accept are those proposed in the Queen's University report, which leads to an increase in exclusion zones. However, I think that we are in a better position than we were before speaking to the Commission last month. On the economic impact, as I said, landings in 2009 were worth around £140,000, so it would be detrimental for the seven larger boats that are fishing on the lough.

Rural Schools

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what actions are planned to assess and address the impact on rural communities resulting from rural school closures. (AQO 1808/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Quality education and good schools play a vital role in sustaining our rural communities. Indeed, I recently raised concerns about rural school closures directly with the Minister of Education. School provision is the responsibility of the Department of Education and, therefore, any proposal to close a school is a matter for the Minister of Education. It is my understanding that a published statutory development proposal is required before there can be any significant change in the schools estate, such as a school closure. I am assured that the Department of Education's sustainable schools policy, which addresses the issue of rural schools and was rural-proofed prior to publication, rigorously assesses any published development proposal.

The Minister of Education has advised that he appreciates the central place that a school has in many communities, both rural and urban, but that his focus is on the quality of education provided to those children.

He will not take lightly any decision to close a school, but he will not shy away from any such decision if it is the right thing to do. Although the Department of Education takes the lead on this issue, I will continue to work with my ministerial colleagues and their departmental officials through various means, including the rural White Paper action plan, to ensure that the provision of high-quality education supports the sustainability of our rural communities.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Minister is well aware of her party's Love Rural Ireland campaign south of the border, which will fight the closure of rural schools and states:

"The small local school is at the heart of most local communities."

How does the Minister feel that the current threat by the Education Department in the North to close rural schools compares to the Dublin Government's threats to do so, and will she explain her party's somewhat schizophrenic approach to the issue?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am absolutely aware of my party's rural Ireland campaign, and I am delighted to be part of it. I will attend one of its events next week. I do not think that my party is anywhere at odds with itself. It is clear, and its argument for lower enrolment numbers for rural schools showed Sinn Féin's commitment to protect such schools. The sustainability criteria are not just about numbers. They are also about educational experience, which has to be at the core of decisions on where not to maintain schools. It has to be about accessibility and strong links with the community, and those are just three of the six sustainability criteria. That shows that there is no being at odds with, or any difference in, the approach that my party is taking right across this island.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister believe that the long-term impact of rural school closures will raise the number of our young people who will look elsewhere for education and employment because urban schools will not have the same understanding of rural communities?

Mrs O'Neill: Quite a lot of our rural communities are being decimated by many young people going elsewhere, particularly Australia, for work. Some communities are being hit very hard and would have difficulty in fielding a GAA team because of the number of young people who are leaving. The Executive and Assembly need to do all that they can to maintain the rural way of life and to maintain and support people to enable them to continue to live there. As I said, the criteria for sustainable rural schools look at links with the community, accessibility, strong leadership and management, and the educational experience of the child, which are vital to maintaining our rural schools.

Mr Elliott: Has the Minister identified any specific areas where closing rural schools would be detrimental? If so, where are they?

Mrs O'Neill: Assessing the sustainability of schools and their future is a matter for the Department of Education, not me. My Department will continue to work with the Department of Education and any other Department to rural proof any of their policies. In developing all policies, we need to be mindful of their implications and any inequality that may result. Someone may be disadvantaged just because of where they live. That is the type of work that this Department will be involved in.

Woodland

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what commitment her Department will give to increase protection for ancient and long-established woodlands. (AQO 1809/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In January this year, I visited an ancient woodland at Drumlamph, just outside Maghera, and saw at first hand how the local Carntogher Community Association, in partnership with the Woodland Trust and supported by my Department's Forest Service, is working to maintain and enhance the special wildlife characteristics of this ancient woodland for the whole community. In addition to supporting the management of these woodlands, my Department's proposals for a felling licence, made under the Forestry Act 2010, will offer some protection for ancient and long-established woodland from unregulated felling by permitting felling under licence, subject to conditions to be set out in a felling management plan.

Section 18(5) of the Forestry Act makes special provision for ancient woodland by requiring my Department to:

"have regard to the desirability of maintaining the special character of that woodland".

The felling management plan will include details of the characteristics of the woodland in which the proposed felling is to take place, details of planned felling and re-establishment operations and the species of trees with which the land will be replanted. A condition of any felling management plan will be that the land is replanted in accordance with the rules and practice of good forestry as set out in the 'Forestry Standard'. On ancient woodland sites, the standard recommends that the features of ancient woodland remnants are protected and consideration is given to the progressive restoration to native woodlands.

However, in certain situations, the Forestry Act excludes the requirement for a felling licence; for example, when felling is required for the purpose of carrying out development authorised by planning permission or when felling is required close to an electric line. In those situations, the Act does not provide protection for ancient and long-established woodland. A further protection is provided for ancient

woodland by my Department's Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations 2006, which regulate deforestation for the purpose of converting woodland to another type of land use.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister may be aware that three areas of woodland in my constituency — Glenarm forest, Glenariff forest park and Woodburn forest near Carrickfergus — are currently affected by Japanese larch disease. What action is her Department taking to tackle those outbreaks? Can she update the Assembly on its progress in that regard?

Mrs O'Neill: A number of forests across the North have been affected by Japanese larch disease, and there are a number of different diseases such as *phytophthora ramorum* and *phytophthora lateralis* out there. Forest Service has a management plan in place and forestry officers regularly visit all forests to examine trees for potential signs of disease. We encourage private forest owners to do the same and to continue to engage with the Forest Service. Like any disease, it is important that we catch it as early as possible.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How will a felling licence work?

Mrs O'Neill: A felling licence will require woodland owners who intend to fell woodlands to apply to the Department for a licence. Felling will only be permitted subject to a basic felling management plan that is agreed by the Department. It must include information on how the felled area will be regenerated, the time of the felling and the species of trees with which the land will be restocked, all according to the principles of the sustainable forest management plan.

Mr Cree: I am sure that many will be pleased to hear that the 2006 regulations make provision for ancient woodland. However, the Minister's Department has said that the onus is on it to determine whether woodland is ancient. What procedures will be used to determine if that is the case?

Mrs O'Neill: The term "ancient woodland" means that the land has to have been continuously wooded right back to — I think — 1600. The term "long-established woodland" means that land has to have been continuously wooded since the first Ordnance Survey maps were produced between 1830 and 1844.

When landowners identify ancient woodlands or something in their forest that is relevant to that, it is important that they come to the Department so that we can look towards a management plans. We are responsible for the overall strategy for the management of ancient woodland. It is important that anyone who has ancient woodland, particularly in private ownership, comes forward so that we can work out a plan.

Water Boreholes

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on a water borehole scheme for people in rural areas who do not have access to mains water. (AQO 1810/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The rural bore wells scheme is currently in the later stages of development, and I aim to open it for applications in the summer. As you know, that scheme is one of a wide range of initiatives developed under the 'Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework', and it is a strong example of cross-departmental working to tackle an issue that impacts on isolated rural households.

Working in partnership with the Department for Regional Development (DRD), officials are finalising the development of a grant scheme towards the cost of the installation of private bore wells and associated water treatments, with the aim of providing access to safe drinking water where it is not available in isolated rural areas. You will appreciate that there are complex issues with such a scheme to ensure water and construction quality and to maintain complementarity with existing DRD policy.

Householders will be eligible for the grant assistance towards the cost of a bore well if the cost of their water mains requisition exceeds £10,500, as that will ensure parity with householders who receive the maximum allowance for a water mains requisition. Properties must have been built before 1 January 2000 or have replaced domestic properties built before 1 January 2000 that were declared unfit for human habitation. I look forward to the roll-out of the scheme and the benefits that it will bring to households that do not have access to mains water.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis

an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister have a target date in mind? Will she outline how long the scheme will remain open?

Mrs O'Neill: The bore wells scheme is scheduled to be open for applications from Wednesday 6 June to Friday 29 June inclusive. It is anticipated that the scheme will reopen for applications in each of the next three years, subject to demand and a review of the scheme at the end of year 1. As we had to address a number of key development issues, the opening of the scheme could not have been scheduled any earlier.

Those include the quality standards that should be applied to the bore well installation works and water treatment requirements, and the co-ordination of input from DRD, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP's) Central Procurement Directorate and the Geological Survey of NI. We have also sought Executive agreement for the scheme, which has been obtained, and I have submitted a business case in support of the scheme for DFP approval, which we are confident we will receive very soon.

2.45 pm

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that there are still some areas, like in the Sperrins above Gortin and places in the Mourne and the Glens of Antrim, where there is still no public water supply? Equality of access is crucial. Will every effort be made to try to provide a public water supply in preference to a single borehole if that is possible?

Mrs O'Neill: The beauty of this scheme, and all the other schemes that are included under the tackling rural poverty and social isolation strategy, is that it acts as leverage. There are very positive schemes from other Departments that would not happen if this scheme were not taken forward. So, the fact that we are able to leverage support for rural areas that we would not necessarily have had is positive.

In the absence of universal access to the mains, for reasons of cost or otherwise, at least this gives people a good supply of good quality water and access to the borewell. That is not to take away from the fact that DRD is responsible for providing public water. I will always be very

supportive of any schemes that can be taken forward in rural areas.

Rural Development Programme

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the work her Department has undertaken to prepare for the new rural development programme. (AQO 1811/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The EU proposals for rural development were published in October 2011, and negotiations on the detail in Brussels are still at an early stage. I and my officials are working with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the other devolved Administrations to ensure the Commission's proposals remain flexible enough to allow us to meet our future rural development needs.

In preparation for the new rural development programme, my Department is considering the six EU priorities in the proposals and the 23 measures proposed. My officials are initially considering the needs and opportunities for the agrifood industry and the development of our rural areas. Lessons learned from the current and previous programmes, along with examples of best practice, will also help to inform programme development.

The shape and size of a future rural development programme will largely be dependent on the available rural development budget, which will not be known for some time. Therefore, it is important to retain a flexible approach to programme development, as the content of the proposals are subject to change. An important part of the programme development will be engagement with stakeholders and partners. A consultative partnership will be set up later this year to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to provide their views on future programming proposals.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that the MEPs and the member states are suggesting that the budget will be completed in 2014 and that the start of the new common agricultural policy (CAP) will be in 2015, what discussions has the Minister had with the other member states and the UK regions about preparing for a possible period of transition between the two programmes?

Mrs O'Neill: I was in Brussels during the past two weeks, and I put the implications of delay to Georg Haeusler from the EU Commission. He assures me that things are moving on according to their timescale. Obviously, we have to be very mindful that that may not be the case. The Commission would obviously take that approach at this stage. However, their agreeing on the budget is key to moving forward because it will mean we can actually get into the detail of what will be on the table.

I am going to London on Wednesday for a meeting with the DEFRA, which will include representatives from Scotland and Wales, and we will be discussing CAP reform and contingency plans around all of this and where we will be if they do not agree a way forward in time for 2014.

Mr Frew: How does the Minister respond to the criticism that local action groups (LAGs) are being excluded from opening calls in the present rural development programme, which means that they cannot spend the money that is badly needed on the ground?

Mrs O'Neill: I am desperately trying to make sure that this money is spent. We have £100 million left that we need to spend by the end of the programme. Spend has been slow for various reasons that the Member will be aware of, not least the economic climate and the fact that banks are not lending. I have taken a number of measures throughout the course of the programme to encourage spending, and things are improving. The call that I made in December for strategic projects is something that areas have welcomed and constructively engaged with.

Numerous projects have come forward, and I have not closed calls for further applications. However, if we are sitting with a pile of unprocessed applications, our priority should be to send out letters of offer, get the money spent and ensure the continuation of the programme. The strategic projects have been very positive and very much welcomed by all the groups I have spoken to.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What effect will the review of public administration have on the delivery of a future rural development programme?

Mrs O'Neill: Over the coming months, my Department will work with local government and

other Departments on the possibility of governmental involvement in a future rural development programme. Proposals for the next round of EU structural funds have also been published and include a requirement for all EU funds to have a complementary approach and common objectives. Officials from my Department and DFP are considering the EU funding proposals and the potential for a more joined-up approach across funds and Departments. These changes, required as a result of the review of public administration, will have to be taken into consideration at that stage.

Mr Allister: What lessons will be learned from the high level of squandering on administration in the present programme when it comes to applications to the next? Will there be a more efficient process than under the present programme?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member frequently raises the issue of administrative spend. It is fair to say that the percentage of administrative spend is higher when any programme is being set up. Unfortunately, when compared with the overall spend, the balance does not look right. As the programme goes on over the next 18 months, that will, in some ways, even out, and our position will look far better. It is also fair to say that the LAGs and joint council committees (JCCs) have done great work in trying to get out as much spend to the rural communities as possible. We must continue supporting them in doing that. Numerous lessons have been learned, and, in developing the new programme, it would be foolish not to learn from what did not work in the past. We must take good practice on board and make sure that we follow through on that. A consultative partnership will be established later this year, and it will include all those involved in the previous programme. They will work with the Department to ensure that the new programme is fit for purpose and that we deal with the, quite frankly, silly obstacles that the LAGs and JCCs had to overcome in the past.

Rural Heritage

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the action her Department is taking to protect rural heritage. (AQO 1812/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under the rural development programme, measure 3.6 of axis 3 has a budget of £4 million to support projects aimed at

conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage. At present, eight projects have been supplied with investment of £52,000, and a further 49 projects worth £2.3 million have been issued with a letter of offer. Only recently, I attended the official opening of Lissan House outside Cookstown. The 17th century country house on the banks of the Lissan river was restored by the Lissan House Trust at a cost of £1.2 million and opened to the public as a new tourist attraction and heritage facility. Part of that funding was an award of £250,000 from SWARD under the rural development programme.

Through this restoration work, Lissan House Trust aims to encourage the sustainable development of the house and its estate, promote its heritage and tourism potential, and create employment opportunities for the benefit of the local and wider community. I am confident that the easement for strategic projects may assist similar larger projects that would not otherwise be possible.

Additionally, participants in DARD's agrienvironment schemes protect and maintain any historic monument sites on their land that are vulnerable to farming practices. There are, for example, restrictions on cultivation and slurry spreading in the protection zone around a monument. Currently, 1,394 agrienvironment scheme participants manage historic monument sites as part of their management agreement. My Department works closely with colleagues in the Environment Agency, which has responsibility for designating historic monument sites.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she detail what her Department is doing specifically to promote townland names as an important aspect of rural identity and heritage?

Mrs O'Neill: Fáilte go Baile Lios na Scáth. The historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names cannot be underestimated, particularly to the rural community. As the Member knows, there is a great association between people and places. Many townland names have been handed down through time by people who lived there; they are a significant part of our shared and local heritage, and I am keen to support their promotion and preservation. In line with the initiative of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure,

my Department has, for some time, utilised townland names in the addresses of all our DARD offices.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister, in the past couple of questions, referred to the strategic projects that she has asked organisations to come forward with. Does she accept that some projects formerly considered by Departments are best operated and finished by Departments, and will she reconsider her position no longer to allow Departments to apply for funding?

Mrs O'Neill: My priority is to make sure that we do not have to send money back to Europe and to make sure that the money is spent to the best effect for the rural community. We have to do that within the terms of the rural development programme as agreed until 2014, so those are the terms within which you have to continue to work. So long as we get the spend and the projects are viable and sustainable, I intend the Department to work to use that rural development money to the best effect. As I said, however, you have to work within the rules of the current rural development programme. Making changes at this stage would take a very long time in the Commission, and we would actually be at the end of the current programme before you would be able to get anything like that through.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin go nuige. I thank the Minister for her responses. The Department of the Environment (DOE) has a role to play in the protection of rural heritage, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has a role to play in its promotion. Will the Minister outline what strategic communications and discussions have taken place with those Departments? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs O'Neill: It is important, as you say, that we work across Departments, and with DOE in particular, given that it will designate the historic monument. There is a lot of engagement at official level about making sure that protections are in place, with farmers' input, and making sure that the Environment Agency and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development work together. It is also important for tourism potential. As I said, I have not had any official meetings with the Environment Minister or with the tourism Minister, although I know that those are ongoing at official level.

Mrs Overend: The Minister will, no doubt, agree with the sentiment that the Executive should stress the sustainability of conserving and re-using old buildings in the current financial circumstances, especially for consideration as new homes. Will she give her assessment of the thoughts that she is picking up from the contractors and architects involved in regeneration projects? Does she agree that the planning and listed buildings systems are far too process-led rather than outcome-led?

Mrs O'Neill: I have had meetings with the Minister of the Environment about planning. Sometimes, fantastic projects for rural development funding get stuck in the planning process for a long time. It is nearly like a chicken-and-egg situation of whether you have planning permission before you come forward. Those are all things that we need to improve for the new rural development programme. Lissan House is a good example of such a project. The Lissan House Trust is passionate about the project, and the Department will do anything that it can to continue to promote it. It is a tourism project, but it is also a community development for community use; it ticks all the boxes for sustainable rural communities. The Department will try to attract more people to visit our rural communities and the countryside.

Single Farm Payments

7. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the number and value of single farm payments that have yet to be processed. (AQO 1813/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As at 30 April this year, my Department has completed 94.8% of all claims and paid out almost £251 million; that leaves 1,942 claims left to process, with a maximum of £17 million still to be paid for the 2011 scheme year. Those claims are outstanding for a number of reasons, including the need to apply inspection findings, or possibly because probate has not yet been completed or because the farmer has not provided bank account details to allow payment to be credited to their bank account.

Not all the remaining claims may be due to receive a payment because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules.

3.00 pm

The Department is obliged to administer the single farm payment scheme in accordance

with EU rules, which means that the results of validation checks, including on-farm inspections, must be applied to individual claims to calculate the correct amount due before a payment can be released. Some assessments are complex, particularly for claims that have had an on-farm inspection and take longer to clear. At the same time, I am conscious of the current economic climate and recognise that late single farm payments can add to farmers' severe financial difficulty. Indeed, I have met many farmers about that.

I want to drive forward improvements in the way in which claims are processed. I have put in place a number of measures to help to speed up payment in the remaining cases. I have also met the main local banks — I have just one more to meet — and impressed on them the need for flexibility in dealing with farmers to allow them time while they await their 2011 payment. I have to say that the banks have indicated their willingness to consider the circumstances of individual clients caused by late single farm payments.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to refrain from audible conversations so that I do not have to intervene later. They are a distraction to me and, I am sure, to other Members who are trying to listen.

Regional Pay

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the issue of regional pay. (AQO 1822/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I raised my serious concerns about any move towards regional public sector pay with the Chief Secretary, whom I met on 5 March along with the Ministers from Scotland and Wales. My concern really rests on three issues. The first is the deflationary impact that any such proposal could have on an economy such as Northern Ireland's. Secondly, I do not believe that public sector wages in Northern Ireland have distorted the market and made it impossible for the private sector to recruit individuals. Thirdly, I believe that if there is a rate for a job, that rate should be paid.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his commitment to equal pay for equal work, regardless of location, and for the other principles that we wish to abide by. Bearing in mind his talks and the speculation and debate in the media and elsewhere, does he buy into the argument about the money that could be saved, accrued and reinvested in the local economy? What indications has the Treasury given to him about the possibility of any such savings being made?

Mr Wilson: Members of the Conservative Party in Northern Ireland have criticised me for not being visionary enough as far as this policy is concerned. However, I sometimes wonder where they learned their economics. I do not know how you stimulate the economy of Northern Ireland by taking money out of the pockets of workers and spending it through the Government. That does not add to the total amount of money in the economy and, therefore, cannot and will not have a stimulatory effect on the economy.

We will continue to make representations to the Government. It is important that we do not allow the foot in the door on the issue. The Government have said that the block grant will not be affected by such a proposal in this spending period. However, I have no doubt that if, for example, the costs to the health service were reduced by reducing the amount of money paid to nurses in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-east of England, the north-west of England, and so on, that reduced cost to the health service would come back to Northern Ireland in the form of the Barnett consequential. If a smaller amount of money is spent on the health service as a result of those changes, our proportion of what is fixed will be smaller, and the total amount of money coming to us will be reduced, hence the deflationary effect.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I am certainly in favour of the idea of devolving more powers to the Assembly, I am sure that the Minister will agree that the motivation behind such a proposal is to try to cut public sector workers' pay even though our public sector workers lag behind those in Britain. The issue is clearly that private sector pay here is too low rather than public sector pay being too high.

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

Mr Murphy: Does the Minister think that it is much better to move towards the concept of a living wage that has been developed, rather than the idea of a minimum wage?

Mr Wilson: The Member has made a very important point. The idea that public sector pay in Northern Ireland is equivalent to what it is in other parts of the United Kingdom is a false notion anyway. Public sector pay here is 3.5% below the UK average and about 22% below the London average. The difficulty is that private sector wages are about 26% below the national average. I think that it would be absolute madness for us to work on the basis that we make Northern Ireland a low-wage economy. What Arlene Foster is doing, and the whole thrust of our economic policy at present, is to try to attract investment that pushes wages up and adds value in the private sector. That is the kind of economy that I want, not pushing it down to the lowest possible rung.

Mrs Dobson: If regional pay is introduced throughout the United Kingdom, will the levels of economic activity be detrimentally affected and widen the productivity gap between the regions and the greater south-east of England?

Mr Wilson: There is absolutely no doubt about that in the long run, even though the Government gave assurances that in the current comprehensive spending review period, regional pay would not affect the block grant. Let us make no bones about it: the Government are all about delivering health and education, and they see bringing down wages in the regions as a way of reducing the cost of delivering those services.

Under the Barnett consequentials, we get about 3% of what it costs to deliver the service UK-wide. If you drive down the cost of delivering that service, you drive down the amount of money that comes to places such as Northern Ireland. That has a deflationary effect, and it is certainly not a way to stimulate a regional economy.

Air Passenger Duty

2. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of air passenger duty powers.
(AQO 1823/11-15)

4. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline progress on the devolution of air passenger duty powers. (AQO 1825/11-15)

8. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the proposed devolution of air passenger duty powers. (AQO 1829/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 2, 4 and 8 together, since they all relate to air passenger duty.

I will go through the steps that have to be taken for the devolution of air passenger duty powers to Northern Ireland. The first step has already been taken, with the 2012 Finance Bill, which was published on 29 March and is being scrutinised at Westminster. I expect that to receive Royal Assent by autumn at the latest. A legislative consent motion will then be required to seek Assembly agreement in that regard, that is, that Westminster has done the business for us in terms of the legislative change. The Finance and Personnel Committee is considering that.

When Royal Assent has been granted, there will have to be an Assembly Bill, which will enable the Executive to follow through on their commitment to reduce air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights to zero. The draft Bill will be available by the summer and will be brought to the Assembly in early autumn. In the meantime, there will be discussions with HMRC about the full cost, the administrative arrangements and any associated costs.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Has his Department undertaken any analysis of the benefits to the local economy of being able to exercise a broader reduction in air passenger duty rather than just confining it to north American flights?

Mr Wilson: The only power that will be devolved to the Assembly will be for direct long-haul flights. However, they will not just be for north America. If other direct long-haul flights want to come into Belfast, they will be subject to the same changes that we are proposing for flights to North America.

There were a number of reasons why we did not seek wider devolution. First, there was a time constraint. It was an issue that, we believed, we

had to deal very quickly, otherwise we were going to lose the Newark flight. Secondly, there was the cost element to that. If we had wider devolution, the cost to the block grant would, of course, have been much greater. However, we have made the point that, generally, air passenger duty, as it is currently applied by the Treasury at Westminster, is having a damaging effect on the aviation industry in the United Kingdom as a whole, and I believe that it will have a long-term effect on tourism and other economic activity in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Further to that, has there been any other analysis done on what potential income could be brought to local businesses, for example, if such remuneration is granted?

Mr Wilson: One of the reasons why we were so insistent on keeping the direct flight to north America and having this power, so that we could promote other routes, was that we believe that having that connectivity is absolutely vital in attracting foreign investment and in being able to do business with other parts of the world.

Just before Christmas, I attended an event in London, at which the chief executive of Newcastle City Council indicated that since the north-east of England started direct flights with Abu Dhabi — I think; I cannot remember — their business with that region had increased tenfold. That gives an illustration of the importance of having those direct flights into Northern Ireland. Of course, it is not just for business. If you are going to bring foreign investors in, they will want to have direct contact with the place in which they have invested.

Mr McGimpsey: I refer to wider devolution. As I understand it, air passenger duty in Dublin is €3, but it is £60 in Belfast and the UK. There is a massive differential there. Aviation, passengers and airports in Belfast, therefore, start at a massive disadvantage. That has to be looked at in the wider sense.

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

Mr McGimpsey: It has to be looked at in the longer term to give our airports a level playing field, at least, on which to compete.

Mr Wilson: That, of course, is exactly what we have done. Over last summer, when it seemed

that we were not winning this battle, Arlene Foster and I had a number of meetings with Hugo Swire, who, at that stage, was standing in for the Secretary of State. Sometimes, we are very critical of Ministers at Westminster, but when push came to shove, Ministers responded. I know, because I have attended debates in the other place, that the Scottish National Party is envious of the change that has been made in respect of Northern Ireland. It will enable us to create the level playing field that the Member has mentioned, because, of course, the stated intention of the Executive, once we have the power devolved, is to reduce air passenger duty on the direct long-haul flights not to €3 but to zero.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far and congratulate him and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for securing the concession in relation to the air passenger duty for the Newark link. Why is air passenger duty not being devolved and reduced for all flights from Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: There are two reasons for that. First, we had to get a decision by the Government by last September, because that is when Continental was going to pull out. I do not believe that we could have got a commitment from the Government to devolve all the air passenger duty to Northern Ireland within that time constraint. Secondly, there is the issue of cost. It is estimated that the cost of devolving duty on direct long-haul flights will be about £5 million. The devolution of all air passenger duty would have cost us between £60 million and £90 million, and I did not think that that was something that we could have afforded in the block grant.

3.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister tell us whether the people in his Department have had a chance to make any assessment of how other jurisdictions deal with air passenger duty and whether there are any lessons that we might learn from those jurisdictions on how they have handled the question of taxing flights or air passenger duty?

Mr Wilson: Of course, other jurisdictions have not got themselves tied up with the environmental nonsense that has driven the air passenger duty debate. In fact, it is significant that very few other major economies hamper their economies and their airlines in the way in which the UK Government have done. Of course,

this all goes back to the Climate Change Act 2008 and the idea that, somehow or other, by taxing our travel we will save the world. Other countries have been cynical about it. I do not believe that the current Government believe that they will save the world by doing it, but they will certainly fill the Treasury's coffers, and that is what it is all driven by now.

Government: External Consultancy

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the targets for reducing spend on external consultancy.
(AQO 1824/11-15)

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the use of external consultants, whether he will introduce a requirement for a business case to be prepared for all external consultancy proposals.
(AQO 1826/11-15)

Mr Wilson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 5 together.

In 2010-11, which is the last year for which expenditure is available, the amount spent on consultancy across Departments and arm's-length bodies was £16 million. That is a reduction of 56% from the level in 2007-08, and it shows the significant strides that the Executive have taken to reduce the expenditure on consultancy.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he believe that all parts of the public sector should be subject to the same scrutiny when it comes to financial accountability?

Mr Wilson: I believe that all parts of the public sector should be subject to the same scrutiny. Unfortunately, I have got myself in some trouble because I have suggested that bodies such as the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which preaches to other Departments of the need for transparency, scrutiny and abiding by the rules, has decided that it should be exempt from those rules. I am sure that that will draw criticism, and I am looking around for the likely suspects who will stand on their feet in a moment or two to challenge me on that.

My Department believes that when consultancy is undertaken, there should be transparency on, first, the need for it in a business case; secondly, the process by which the consultants

are obtained through the procurement exercise; thirdly, an assessment of whether the consultants' exercise has delivered what it was promised would be delivered; and, fourthly, what lessons have been learned. Unfortunately, the only part of government that seems to think that it is exempt from that scrutiny is the very body that preaches to others that we need to be scrutinised and transparent, and that is the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. It is clear from the PAC report that some of the business cases were of extremely poor quality. What is the Minister going to do to rectify that?

Mr Wilson: We already have guidance in place. That is why it is important. I believe that there should be transparency right across all of government spend. In order to ensure that the consultants that we employ and the results that we get from that consultancy are not of poor quality, there should be an evaluation of what has been learned from the report, the effectiveness of that report, etc, at the end of every consultancy exercise. Those are the kind of guidelines that we now lay down for Departments. I do not have the figures in front of me, but most Departments are now abiding by that. In about 95% of all cases, we do have that learning, assessment and evaluation at the end of the exercise. Of course, the other thing is that, before the process starts, Ministers should ask whether there is a need to have consultants. That is one of the reasons why we have introduced the rule that any consultancy exercise of £10,000 or above has to have ministerial approval.

Mr Elliott: I note that, in 2008, the Department assured the Committee that comprehensive and accurate data on external consultancy expenditure would be available at the touch of a button, which I assume would make it easily accessible to Members of the House as well as to the public. I wonder whether the Minister can tell us what the up-to-date situation is on that. Has there been any progress?

Mr Wilson: I am not too sure what the Member is referring to. I can say that, as far as consultancy is concerned, every Minister should now be aware of what consultancy exercises are going on in their Department, because every Minister should sign off any consultancy exercise that

costs £10,000 or more. Indeed, a Minister can set a lower threshold if they so desire.

Mr Dallat: I have listened carefully to the Minister. It is good to see him give his fully qualified support to the work of the Audit Office. Can he tell me what guidelines he has put in place to end the gravy trains that have dominated life in this Assembly for far too long?

Mr Wilson: Let me put this in context. Consultancy represents 0.2% of the total spend of Departments in Northern Ireland. The Member used the term "gravy trains", but let us get this in context. Let me say again for the record that, since 2007-08, we have reduced consultancy spend in Northern Ireland by 56%. Last year, the reduction was, I think, 38%, bringing it to the lowest figure possible. The Executive have set a target of reducing consultancy spend by 10% year-on-year for the period of this Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have already been answered.

Loans: Interest Rates

6. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures his Department can take in relation to individuals and financial institutions that are providing loans with extortionate interest rates. (AQO 1827/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for that question. Regulation of financial institutions is, of course, not a devolved matter. It is outside the control of my Department. However, I am concerned about lending practices within the high-cost credit markets. I feel that those types of loans are used as a means of exploiting the vulnerable in our society. The Westminster Government are concerned about this, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is taking forward research in this area that will specifically address the impact on consumers and business of introducing a cap on the total cost of credit that can be charged in the short-to medium-term high-cost credit market. I look forward to the results of that research.

Mr Givan: Does the Minister agree that those vulture capitalists who prey on the socially disadvantaged — the most vulnerable — need a better form of regulation, particularly in the advertising and promotion of the types of extortionate interest rates that drive people into destitution?

Mr Wilson: I do. Unfortunately, during the current recession, more and more people are being dragged into this. We have already had debates in the House on payday loans. I believe that the vulnerable in society are now being targeted by many of those who charge extortionate interest rates.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Are there any actions that the Minister's Department can take to warn individuals and families of the dangers inherent in taking out such loans?

Mr Wilson: Not particularly through my Department, but through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which is of course responsible for the trading standards service and enforcing the Consumer Credit Act. There is a requirement to ensure that the rules on advertising, pre-contract disclosure, credit agreements and post-contractual information are all available to people who take out these loans. That is where I think the role of trying to protect people can be found.

Mr Gardiner: Is the Minister satisfied that all the loan companies that advertise their financial services in the media are controlled by the Financial Services Authority?

Mr Wilson: They are not, at present. Indeed, that is one reason why the Government are looking at how they cap the interest on loans, and so on.

I am really glad that the Member has raised the whole issue of how the media is used. He may not have realised it, but his own leader is guilty of what I would describe as almost the promotion of loan-shark type activity. I note the words used during the payday loans debate in the Assembly, when the Member's leader — he was not the leader then, of course — said that he supported the motion for fair interest rates and protection of consumers. However, until this weekend, his own website was promoting Cash Genie, which enabled people to borrow between £75 to £750 at — well, it was a snip, really — an average APR of 2,339%.

Maybe the Member would take that back to his own leader. I am quite happy for the Financial Services Authority to deal with the issue, or for Arlene Foster, through DETI and the consumer credit authorities to deal with it, but maybe just by a bit of self-denial, the Member's own leader could do it. He, in the very week when he was going to

visit poor families to see how he could help them in the current recession, was advertising loans for those poor families at 2,339%. Maybe that is where the action should start.

Public Sector Pensions

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on discussions with trade unions on public sector pension contributions. (AQO 1828/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As Minister of Finance and Personnel, my area of responsibility is the principal Civil Service pension scheme and, therefore, I can only comment and update on trade union discussions relevant to that scheme.

The consultation on the proposed increases to employee contribution rates for 2012-13 was launched in October 2011, and that was issued directly to the main Civil Service unions. The Department of Finance and Personnel's response document was issued again to the Civil Service trade unions on 6 February, and they were provided with copies of the draft legislation before it was laid. Further increases in member contributions will take effect in April 2013 and April 2014. The structure of those increases is subject to further consultation and discussions with trade unions.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he recognise the importance of proper and meaningful dialogue with the unions on the issue to ensuring a better local understanding of the position imposed on the Executive by the Westminster coalition?

Mr Wilson: I do. I, like many other Assembly Members, have had representations made to me in the past couple of weeks as increased pension contributions have started to show through on people's payslips. I fully understand the difficulties that the increased pension contributions are causing people who are in employment at the moment, especially where wages are frozen. Of course there needs to be consultation. However, I caution the Member and indicate that our room for manoeuvre on this is fairly limited. Had we not introduced even the increase that went through in April of this year, we would have had to find £140 million from the spend on public services to subsidise those pensions. So, while there will be consultation — I intend there to be full consultation — nevertheless, I must add that

warning to any answer that I give. We have very, very limited room for manoeuvre in this.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister tell the Assembly whether any increases to the Civil Service compensation scheme will be subject to the approval of the Assembly?

Mr Wilson: There are two ways in which this can happen. The legislation is going through Westminster, and Northern Ireland changes could be linked onto that if a legislative consent motion were accepted by the Assembly, or we could have a full debate on it in the Assembly. What course we take on it is up to the Executive. The one thing that I would say to the Member is that we can have all the discussions that we want in the Assembly, but our room for manoeuvre is very limited.

Even the financial wizardry of the SDLP, such as it is, cannot save us from the consequences of the very costly deviations from any scheme that is proposed on a UK-wide basis.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are no other Questions. Sorry, Sammy Douglas.

Government: External Consultancy

9. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps have been taken in relation to irregular external consultancy spend. (AQO 1830/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In relation to any irregular spend, not just an external consultancy, the procedures to be followed are well established. Where it is found that any expenditure, including expenditure on external consultancy, has been incurred without prior approval or in excess of approved levels, that is then reported immediately to the Audit Office. The Audit Office, which has a very important role in acting independently, albeit it should still be subject to the same transparency, will, in turn, report on any such occurrences in the course of its annual audit of the relevant accounts. The Department or other body found to have incurred irregular expenditure will then be required to explain the circumstances that gave rise to the irregular spend and provide satisfactory assurance that it has taken steps to avoid a reoccurrence.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

Private Members' Business

Tourism: "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming"

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to support and encourage Tourism Ireland's plans for "The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming" in 2013, which will promote Ireland as a tourism destination to 70 million people worldwide; and further calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure that the benefit from these plans is derived on an all-island basis and that the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 celebrations are included as an integral attraction.
— [Mrs D Kelly; Mr A Maginness; Mr P Ramsey.]

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I will address some of the issues raised in the debate. I listened carefully to what Members said. Some of it was enlightening; some of it was not, frankly. I have to say from the start that the motion is fundamentally flawed in so far as it calls on us to welcome Tourism Ireland's plans for "The Gathering". Of course, it is not Tourism Ireland that is promoting or has brought forward "The Gathering". It is an initiative of the Republic of Ireland's Government.

Many others referred to "The Homecoming" in Scotland, which is the model that the Republic of Ireland's Government took for their initiative. In that initiative, the Scots invested £5.5 million to bring, as they hoped, many extra visitors to Scotland. As it happened, they brought just 95,000 extra visitors into Scotland. Indeed, the fact that 45,000 Ulster people went to Dublin at the weekend shows that it was not a great return for the Scottish Executive.

I congratulate the Ulster rugby team on its marvellous performance, and we all look forward to going to Twickenham to —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: I will, indeed, give way.

Mr Flanagan: I just ask for clarification on the Minister's figures: is she talking about only the rugby, or is she including the fans who went to see Fermanagh and Tyrone play in Croke Park?

Mrs Foster: There could be extra figures, if that is the case, and that means that there were more Ulster people in Dublin at the weekend. The point I am making, however, is that the Scottish Government put an awful lot of money into "The Homecoming". Indeed, it was the subject, as I understand it, of a Public Accounts Committee investigation, because they did not feel that they received the value for money that they would have liked.

However, the point I am also making is that this motion calls on me to get involved with Tourism Ireland's plans. They are not Tourism Ireland's plans. It then goes on to talk about me engaging with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, which, of course, I do on an ongoing basis. It then talks about the UK City of Culture in Derry/Londonderry being included as an integral part of what is happening through "The Gathering".

It is important to put "The Gathering" into context. It was launched at the Clinton Global Initiative in October of last year. It was launched as not just a tourism initiative but something much wider. To give you a line from the Republic of Ireland's own Department, it saw "The Gathering":

"being positioned as a platform for business or community to connect with networks around the world. It is seen as an opportunity to help restore the local and national economy, rebuild local and national pride and renew Ireland's global reputation."

"The Gathering" is not just about bringing more tourists into the Republic of Ireland or onto this island; it has a much wider remit. That is fine; that is something that the Republic of Ireland's Government have decided they need to do in the context of the many difficulties that they have had in the past.

My focus is on the continuing success of ni2012 as we concentrate on upcoming events such as the Irish Open, the opening of the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, the Clipper race, the Peace One Day concert, the Land of Giants festival and the fiftieth anniversary festival at Queen's. I mention those because they are in our group of eight international-scale events, but I want to say across the House that there are many other activities happening in 2012 and 2013. I have four pages of details of what is happening in Fermanagh between now and the end of the year, and I am quite happy to share those four pages with the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone after the debate.

As I have said in the House and in answer to questions, I welcome any initiatives for 2013 that bring visitors onto the island, but my main focus in 2013 will be on the significant plans that we already have for the UK City of Culture in Londonderry and the World Police and Fire Games to be hosted in Belfast, not to mention continuing to build on the legacy that we hope will have been generated by ni2012.

The programme of events in 2013 is being developed by Northern Ireland's Tourist Board, which is working closely with the Culture Company in Londonderry to ensure that we have an exciting programme of events, highlights of which will be released in May and the full programme in September 2012. I can confirm that the city will act as host to the Turner prize, which will be only the third time it will have been held outside the Tate Britain, its base since the prize began in 1984. That is a hugely significant event for the Maiden City.

The city will also act as host to the all-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil, again the first time that this celebration of Irish music, song and dance and culture will be held in Northern Ireland. As one of our signature projects, Londonderry has a lot to offer the tourist already visiting. It has a unique tourism offering and the potential to achieve international standout. I get rather disappointed when I hear Members trying to talk down the tourism potential of the many beautiful areas around Northern Ireland.

There has been over £10 million of capital investment in Londonderry to date, resulting in the redevelopment of the city's historical buildings through a built heritage programme led by the Tourist Board. The programme provides a way for Londonderry to retell its many stories and reveal its shared culture and heritage to tourists, visitors and the community alike. Mrs Kelly said that she hoped we had moved away from a "them and us" agenda. If she wants to look anywhere, she should look to the city of Londonderry as an area where we are sharing our culture and heritage and putting that forward to tourists who come from all over. We hope to continue with that in the way we are investing in the city of Londonderry.

I look forward to seeing that work completed, whether it is the Guildhall, the "Wee Nun's School" as it is known colloquially — the Aras Colmcille — or the Apprentice Boys and what they are doing in relation to their hall. We will

support all of those because we want to support the tourism offering right across Northern Ireland and right across the community in Northern Ireland.

Turning to some of the points that have been made, I want to say to Mrs Kelly that we are promoting the Titanic in the rest of Northern Ireland through the work of Tourism Ireland; not just to the 70 million members of the Irish diaspora that she talked about, but to a global audience. One disappointing thing about this debate had been the quoting of statistics that have quite frankly been wrong. Mr McDonnell told us that 60% of our international tourists come through Dublin. That is wrong. Thirty per cent of our international visitors come through Dublin, and we want to see more such visitors; of course we do. The unemployment statistics that Mrs Kelly —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will do so if you let me finish this point.

The unemployment statistic of 7·2% that Mrs Kelly stated is wrong. The unemployment statistic for Northern Ireland is 6·8%.

I am happy to give way to the Member.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for giving way. Far be it from me to defend Dr McDonnell after the way he spoke to MLAs in the House, but I think that the figure he was quoting related to the number of people coming to the island who are not here to visit family and friends; not all overseas visitors. I do not have the figures to hand, but that is the figure he was trying to quote.

Mrs Foster: The percentage he quoted to me — this what I understood it to mean but I stand to be corrected — was that 60% of visitors to Northern Ireland come through Dublin; whereas, our figures are, I think, 28% for 2010 and around 32% or 33% for 2011. I am not making a point because obviously we want to see as many visitors come up to Northern Ireland as possible. Statistics have been thrown around this afternoon, and, frankly, very few of them have been accurate. Members would do well to look at the statistics before they come to the House.

Mr Moutray stated that our tourism industry should be represented and that we should try to build Northern Ireland as a brand, and that is exactly what we are trying to do. Mr Flanagan commented on Homecoming Scotland, which I

already mentioned. He said that he wants to see collaboration between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There is good collaboration between both jurisdictions. However, I have to say that the collaboration will stop at Twickenham when Ulster take on Leinster.

Mr Flanagan: There are nine counties in Ulster.

Mr Foster: I am quite happy to admit to that at this time.

Mrs Overend said that we should not be looking to the Irish Government but to our Government to see what we can do in Northern Ireland. She referred to the draft tourism strategy. I would like to have seen the draft tourism strategy through the Executive. However, is that holding back what we are doing in tourism? No, it is not. What we have seen over the past period of time is a 4% increase. I am very pleased with that, and I want to see it growing.

Mr Lunn referred to the fact that we were too small to do something on our own and that we should look to a bigger entity. I have to tell him that we are looking to a bigger entity: it is called the United Kingdom. We are jointly connected with a larger initiative called the GREAT campaign. We are very much part of that campaign. We have been profiled, along with the rest of the UK, for all the visitors coming to our shores to celebrate the Olympics later this year.

Mr Dunne spoke about the recent visits to the Middle East and India. Mr McKay said that the Department was not engaged.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. I wish to point out that the stats, if any of them were wrong, came from the Assembly's Research and Information Service. I will speak to it and clarify that point. In relation to the British Olympics, the Westminster Government took so little acknowledgement of Northern Ireland that they decided not to host any of the games here. Therefore, it has not been very successful at all.

Mrs Foster: I think that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister would have something to say on that, given that we are to have training camps here.

Mr Ross: It is the London Olympics, not the UK Olympics.

Mrs Foster: It is the London Olympics, as my friend rightly points out.

Can I also say to her: is she so ignorant that she does not realise that the Cultural Olympiad is playing a very significant part in the major events that are taking place here this year? I know that the Member is blinded by the idea that everything has to be on an all-Ireland basis. However, she really needs to be less myopic and to look at what the United Kingdom is doing for us and our tourism figures. Actually, most of our tourists come from Great Britain. So, is she now saying that she does not want visitors coming from Great Britain? Is that what the Member is saying?

Mr McKay talked about why the Department was not engaged on the issue of "The Gathering". I was told about "The Gathering" initiative — and members of the SDLP might like to take cognisance of this issue — one day before it was launched in Dublin at the Clinton Global Initiative.

Mr McKay then went on to speak about the NIO's negative approach in relation to the visa waiver scheme. It is actually the Irish Government that need to come up to the mark on security issues in order to allow the visa waiver to happen. Indeed, anybody who has a United Kingdom visa can travel to the Republic of Ireland, so visitors who come to the UK during the Olympics can go right throughout the British Isles with a UK visa.

3.45 pm

Mr Frew said that there was a need to be positive about Northern Ireland, and Mr Swann referred to tourism in our own country. I will point out to him that Tourism Ireland has a statutory duty to give standout to Northern Ireland in its work across the world. There will be a very strong legacy after the UK City of Culture. I am more than happy to look at genealogy tourism; we are doing a lot of work on that in North America through Tourism Ireland mailshots.

Mr McMullan said that we were being parochial, but I do not accept that. We are using our contacts across the UK and through Tourism Ireland. Dr McDonnell gave us a lecture on what we needed to do. In his view, more visitors come from Australia to Northern Ireland than come to the Republic of Ireland. That is a fact that people sometimes miss.

When I spoke to Mr Attwood at the Executive meeting last Thursday, I told him that I would not support the motion because it was political. It is clearly a political motion, but that will

not stop me from working with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to promote tourism in Northern Ireland. The motion should be voted down because of its political nature, and I look forward to working with colleagues to promote Northern Ireland across the world.

Mr A Maginness: In summing up, I want to reflect on some of the points that have been made. The motion is not political, nor was it ever intended to be. It was intended to be a helpful motion and to create an extra dimension to tourism in Northern Ireland. It was intended to be beneficial to all our people and to be a boost to tourism.

The idea of "The Gathering" — the Minister referred to it having been mentioned at the Clinton summit in Dublin — is very much based on drawing in all the disparate elements of Irishness throughout the world, whether they be Ulster-Scots, a more Celtic or Gaelic view, or just a common perception of Irishness. "The Gathering" is intended to be a magnet to bring together all the talents throughout the Irish diaspora. Indeed, it is based on the experience of people in Israel, who have used this worldwide pool of talent to draw in investment, tourism and anything that is beneficial to that country and to those people. It is a good example of people using a worldwide reputation to assist in the development of their country. That is what "The Gathering" is intended to do. I do not think that it is some sort of —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will; I am not sure how many minutes I have.

Mrs D Kelly: You have 10 minutes.

Mr A Maginness: I have 10 minutes; I will give way.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree entirely with the analogy that he has drawn with Israel, except that, in this case, we are talking about a Government south of the border who set forward an agenda and a programme without consultation with the Government in Northern Ireland. They have a competing agenda for tourism. It is not complementary, as the Minister clearly set out.

Mr A Maginness: I will take the Member's second point first. It is not a competing agenda. If we attract tourists to Ireland as a whole, North or South, it is of benefit to the whole country

— to the whole island of Ireland. Politics should not come into it. We should not be little Irelanders, and nor should we be little Ulster people.

We should be embracing the whole expanse of this island to advance the interests of all our people, irrespective of North and South. That is what I believe was intended by the Irish Government. You might have a point about the lack of consultation. I just do not know —

Mr Humphrey: One day.

Mr A Maginness: Hold on. I do not know the full circumstances behind that or the full background to it. If there was not proper consultation between the Irish Government and the Executive, that is regrettable, but let us move on from that position. Let us not hoke over the ashes. Let us move forward and see whether some benefit can be derived from working co-operatively with the Southern Government on what I think is a very interesting, novel and dynamic idea. As I said, it has been very beneficial to the Israeli people. Let us use the idea to benefit all our people. I do not think that politics should be involved in this, and, coming from the SDLP, I say most sincerely that we did not intend that this be seen as a partisan motion. I would like colleagues, particularly those on the unionist Benches, to take that on board and to accept our bona fides on that assertion.

The Minister is quite right to say that "The Gathering" is not just about tourism. It is also about investment and about taking advantage —

Mr S Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, of course.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. I was here at the beginning of the debate. Do you agree that, at the outset, Mrs Kelly set the wrong tone in the way in which she presented the motion?

Mr A Maginness: I was here for her speech. I cannot give you that speech verbatim, but I could not see anything in it that is antipathetic to what I have said.

I repeat that "The Gathering" idea is a good idea for all of us, North and South. There is no political agenda involved. Everyone benefits, and it is worth trying. We have done remarkably well, and I give credit to the Minister for the development of tourism in Northern Ireland and

particularly for where we have got to in 2012. I believe that this will be a most successful year, and I and my party fully support it. We support the fact that money, effort and time have been invested. We support Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. We support all the efforts that have been made by a whole combination of people who have given great leadership to the tourism industry throughout Northern Ireland. We do not want to see that damaged. We want to see it developed and advanced, and we want to see people investing, creating jobs and making money. That is what tourism is all about.

There is huge potential in Northern Ireland for tourism, but you cannot just view tourism in Northern Ireland in isolation from the rest of Ireland, because people from outside view Ireland as one holiday destination. They do not distinguish between Northern Ireland and the South. They just see us as Irish people. We may have peculiarities, and, from time to time, we may not get on with one another, but, by and large, they like us. That is very important. The natural charms of north Antrim travel widely throughout the world. The natural charms of the people of south Armagh are the same, and people love our warmth and friendship. They may think us a little eccentric at times when it comes to our politics, but they do like our hospitality and our tourism offering.

Mr Byrne: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Very quickly.

Mr Byrne: Tourism is largely an economic exercise. Does the Member agree that, whether we like it or not, more international flights come into Dublin, Cork, Shannon and Knock airports than we have operating at Belfast International Airport? The key question is: how do we capture a greater percentage of those who come into the Republic through the tour operators and get them onto our route up here?

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely, and I am sure that even the Minister will agree. If we can get people to come to this island and move northwards from the South, that will be of benefit to us; and if we can get more people to come to Belfast International Airport or to other airports in Northern Ireland and move southwards, that will be of benefit. Let us concentrate on working together with the southern jurisdiction to develop what we have.

This island has something very special to offer; its environment, people, culture and music make it a world leader. However, we must develop that infrastructure and develop the ways and means of attracting people to this island; there is no reason for us to put political obstacles in front of that. There is no reason for us to put Tourism Ireland in one place and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in another. Let us work co-operatively, because tourism is, in my view, a non-competitive situation.

I hope that the Minister will reflect and perhaps rethink her stance. I know that she has taken a view on the matter, but there could be benefit in looking at it in a more relaxed way —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr A Maginness: — to move forward to embrace at least some elements of “The Gathering”.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mr Chris Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, 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 Byrne and Mr Rogers.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, 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 Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots,

Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to support and encourage Tourism Ireland's plans for “The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming” in 2013, which will promote Ireland as a tourism destination to 70 million people worldwide; and further calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure that the benefit from these plans is derived on an all-island basis and that the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 celebrations are included as an integral attraction.

Adjourned at 4.11 pm.



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